A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

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Author advice: This is the longest chapter yet. Get a snack and a drink.

Chapter 47

It was Purity Alpha's first morning aboard *Encounter,* when she was introduced to the full crew for the first time. The artificial girl introduced herself with her standard opening:

"Greetings, crew of the *Encounter*. I am Purity Alpha, biomechanical android, or biodroid if that phrase is more to your liking. I am pleased to meet you all." She made a polite if ridiculously out-of-place bow, her tail of long white hair falling over her shoulder.

"She says this to everyone," Esera told the crew. "Purity–you have Commander Voyan to thank for that name by the way–has been a long-term project by Khan, our super tactical droid friend. Allegedly. She was designed to be a spy, but Voyan and I felt she stood out too much for that. So now she's with us."

Their reactions were mixed. Lieutenant-Commander Durm was fascinated, Lieutenant Oto perturbed, Ensign Xiss confused, Ensign Klaud... Well, there was just no telling with the Trodatome. Alize and Buna hardly batted an eye.

"Do you eat our kind of food, honey?" asked Alize.

"Yes, I do eat certain kinds of organic food. I have a biochemical reactor in place of a stomach. I can provide a complete list of ideal foods for maximum reactor output-"

"Later, Purity," said Esera. "This machine was built by mad science. She *should* be harmless to us, but I know her creator. Don't start trouble with Purity. She could kill you seven different ways before your body hits the deck, I'd put money on that."

"Affirmative, Captain Komara," Purity said, smiling. "I am familiar with sixteen different martial arts traditions as well as-"

"See? She'll kill you. Buna, be careful about testing her resolve, you might get seriously hurt."

Buna laughed. "Droids ain't people, testin' it ain't on my agenda."

"On the contrary, I am as much a person as anyone else here." Purity's smile was gone, and she gave the Barabel an intense, unblinking stare. *I don't like that look in her eyes,* thought Esera. She *almost* looked angry, in a very calm way.

"We'll see about that," said Buna.

For a moment, Esera thought a fight was about to break out, but Purity broke off her unnerving stare and took her seat at the table. Life went on as usual, or as usual as it could aboard a ship like this one. Voyan later convinced Zule to let Purity borrow some of her clothes, as they naturally fit the biodroid girl better.

Encounter came off the Corellian Run at Arkanis, the southernmost outpost of Hutt power in the Galaxy, exiting hyperspace just long enough to switch hyperlane vectors. A quick scan revealed nothing out of the ordinary. They arrived at Tatooine a few hours later, and once more, found nothing unusual at the seat of the Desilijic Hutt cartel. But this time, a message came from the planet:

"*Separatist destroyer, turn back immediately. You are in violation of the Tatooine Treaty of 978-*"

Esera motioned for a droid to cut it off. "We didn't sign any treaty," she said to Buna, *Encounter*'s guide to Hutt Space.

"You still ain't welcome around these parts," Buna said, chuckling. "Better lose 'em before we get where we're goin'."

"Lose who?"

"Them." Buna pointed at the scanner readout. Three small ships were coming up from the surface. "Trackers. Hutts can't hit us, but the Republic fleet at Geonosis can. They've been sittin' there for more than a year, no one goes in that system and comes back out again."

And I know why, thought Esera. Tarkin's–formerly Darth Sidious's–Ultimate Weapon had been under construction there until recently. In the past few months it had been moved, but to where, no one could say. Without a moon-sized battlestation frame to guard, maybe the Republic fleet would be gone. But she wouldn't take that risk, so she had *Encounter* set off to Cranan immediately, via the Crystal Passage hyperlane. Going immediately got slower. Getting from Druckenwell to Tatooine had been just as long a trip as Tatooine to Cranan, and things only got worse from there. The Cranan-Excarga route was an old hyperlane and far from efficient in its charting, but it was the fastest way into the spinward part of Hunnovers Sector.

Tellanroaeg, site of the Confederate Second Fleet's last stand, was also in this sector and located on the Corellian Run, but on the opposite side from where they needed to be. There were no well-charted hyperlanes across it, on the coreward-rimward axis. Esera could at least take it a little easy in this sector, though, many planets had Separatist sympathies, including the regional trade hub of Siskeen, ruled by the despot Tar-Mairon, who'd taken the bold move of ending slavery on his planet, inside Hutt Space. The Republic had swept through this sector seven months ago in a pincer attack towards Tellanroaeg, but as soon as they'd passed by, the Separatists had crawled out from their hiding places and taken everything back. Siskeen was their first stop in the sector. Scanners told her that the Confederate battleship *Aethra* was in orbit, a rare display of firepower in this remote place. Esera put on her diplomat's face, if not the diplomat's dress, and contacted the planet's ruler.

An astoundingly beautiful Sephi man answered, his ageless face could have been carved from marble, his black hair long and lustrous. There was a dangerous cunning in his flame-colored eyes, though; Esera couldn't let his devastatingly handsome looks distract her. "Welcome to Siskeen, Lady Komara," said the Sephi. "I am Tar-Mairon, lord over this world. Your visit has been expected."

"I'm here for fuel and information," said Esera, locking whatever thoughts she had about this man deep in the back of her mind. She felt her cheeks growing warm anyway. "I'm on my way to the Zoma system, but there are very few hyperlanes that go there."

"Whatever you have need of, you have but to ask, and it will be yours," Tar-Mairon said, with a smile that raised the heat in Esera's cheeks even more.

"Thank you," Esera managed to say.

"Would you care to join me on the surface for the day, Lady Komara?" the Sephi asked. "There are many things Siskeen has to offer to weary travelers, and we would be delighted to host a noblewoman of Raxus."

"Um, uh, no, I mean, no thanks," stammered Esera. "I'm a little behind schedule, I think I should stay up here, you know?"

"Oh my, I had no idea." Tar-Mairon raised a hand to his cheek, a gold ring glinting in the light. "I will tell the fueling station to put everything on hold for you, and I'll transmit my government's secret navigation charts myself."

"Thank you very much." Esera let out her breath when the transmission ended. *I'm really glad there were only droids on the bridge for that,* she thought, wiping sweat from her brow. The Sephi's fiery eyes may have actually been on fire, and transmitting their heat through the viewscreen. *I need to stop getting flustered like this,* Esera told herself. *Why do hormones have to make things so difficult?* A cold shower would clear her mind of any temptations planted by the all-powerful planetary ruler.

"So, that was Lady Komara," Tar-Mairon said, a cool smile on his face. "Adorable little thing."

"Yes, sire," said Kronaak, having no basis on which to judge what humanoids found adorable or not. They were all monkeys to him. "Captain Komara is the head of Naval Intelligence. Despite her youth, she is good at what she does. It's her sources who have tipped us off that the Hutts are up to something."

"So it would seem..." The Sephi unfolded himself from his seat, and stood. He would have towered over most other creatures, but Kronaak still loomed higher. They were in the overlord's private office, in the great tower he'd built as a monument to his victory.

"It was wise to help her," Kronaak went on. "She answers to General Grievous, and General Grievous alone. Make a friend of her, and you will have an ally in the General."

"Yes, a powerful ally, indeed," agreed Tar-Mairon.

In what was approaching four years of war, Kronaak had not once been back to his birthplace, Siskeen. Being here was strange. Siskeen was a food production hub, its highly active tectonics spawned countless volcanoes that coated the planet in fertile ash. They also grew lifeforms for consumption here, only animals now, but sentients too in the past. Kronaak's people had been among them, until Tar-Mairon had freed all sentients after his takeover. For that, Kronaak was eternally grateful. Grateful enough to cut the deal he was trying to cut now.

"If she signs the treaty with you, it's as good as law," Kronaak said. "Tell her about what you've done for the people of this planet. She took down the Zygerrian slavers, you know."

"So you've told me." Tar-Mairon nodded, eyes twinkling. "It's a shame she refused the invitation down."

"You scared her."

"In a way, I did." The Sephi smiled. "She wasn't afraid *of* me, she was afraid of how much she *liked* me."

"But you only just met," Kronaak said.

"It's a humanoid thing, Admiral Kronaak," said Tar-Mairon. "I do tend to have an effect on most females. And quite a few males. I'm happy either way. Lady Komara's not quite to my taste in that regard, unfortunately for her. Too thick in figure, and too young, I must be decades older than her. But I would adopt her as a daughter. Such a cute face..." Tar-Mairon sighed.

Kronaak rumbled, as he lacked an ability to clear his throat. "The treaty, sire."

"The treaty, yes, Admiral Kronaak. All of Hunnovers is mine, and I get a monopoly on the Excarga trade route. In return, I pledge my armies to your operation. It's all very fair."

That evening, with *Encounter* preparing to depart for the Zoma system, Lady Komara was persuaded to come down, if just to sign the treaty. With her were two of General Grievous's magnaguards, and a large Skakoan in armor. Komara and Kronaak could only exchange a nod of acknowledgement, despite this being the first time they'd ever met face to face. *She's tiny,* thought Kronaak. Word had got around that this girl had been a Jedi. The rumor was she'd been at Grievous's side during the failed coup, and they all knew for a fact she'd been orchestrating his less-destructive plans for the past six or so months. *How could there be so much in one so small?* Kronaak wondered. Between Tar-Mairon, Kronaak, the Skakoan, and the magnaguards, the young woman was dwarfed.

"This is an interesting treaty," she said, after she and Tar-Mairon had signed it. "Grievous told me you weren't a diplomat, Admiral Kronaak. I mean no offense, but it shows."

Kronaak spread his mandibles, his best attempt at a smile. "I have never made claims to be one."

"This treaty makes me overlord of this entire sector," said Tar-Mairon.

"And calls upon you to support an invasion of Hutt Space beyond this region," Komara added. "It assumes you've got the capabilities to do so."

"I will provide the logistics," Kronaak told them. "Tar-Mairon will provide troops and armaments."

"Then we *are* planning to go to war with the Hutts, soon," said the Human. She looked at the treaty's text again. "Admiral Kronaak, this treaty obliges us to help Siskeen in defensive *and* offensive wars."

"Yes," said Kronaak. "Siskeen has been a steadfast ally."

"Just what ships do we have to help Siskeen go conquering, right now?" asked Komara, eyes narrowed. "I just got done saving Emberlene from total defeat with one ship. We're a good deal closer to major hyperlanes, here."

"I see why Grievous wanted you to do the negotiations, Lady Komara." Tar-Mairon smirked, bringing a hand to his chin. "Whatever deal you offered me, my former subject would have given me a better one. Isn't that right, Admiral Kronaak?"

"Correct," said Kronaak. "My people owe you everything, sire."

"A single servant who serves because of love is worth more than a thousand slaves who serve because of fear," said Tar-Mairon, tapping his temple.

"Well, what's done is done," Komara said with a sigh. "It can't be helped. Anything I negotiate is going to be a lot more careful than this document though!"

"I should hope so, my lady." Tar Mairon smiled. "Are you sure you wouldn't care to join me for dinner?"

The Human girl's face went pink. "No, no, I'm fine, really, thank you. I have a very good cook of my own."

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET was all Obi-wan needed to read to know that the report from the Center for Military Operations was going to be bad news. But just how bad, he wasn't prepared for.

"Maul escaped," said Mace Windu, his face somewhere between disbelief and disgust. "Maul escaped from the most heavily guarded installation in the Galaxy."

"Analysis of the computer systems found signs of tampering," said Ki-Adi-Mundi. "He clearly had someone on the inside."

"*How* did he make contact, though?" Obi-wan asked. He had his face buried in his hands. Maul on the loose *again* was the last thing *anyone* needed.

"Maybe he didn't," Kit Fitso said, with a shrug. "Maybe someone knew he was there and went in to grab him. Someone like, say, a certain Sith lord deprived of his apprentice."

"Think it Sidious, do you?" asked Yoda.

"There's no one else who could do it. Sidious clearly has access to the highest levels of government," said Kit Fitso. "Why couldn't he break Maul out of prison? That's a ready-made Sith apprentice right there."

"Maul has no love for Sidious, according to Ashoka's report," Obi-wan reminded the Council. "He wanted her to join up with him and kill Sidious. And me. And Anakin, too."

"Maul's insane," said Mace Windu. "I wouldn't put faith in the ramblings of a madman."

"Even better then, an insane Sith is on the loose on Coruscant. If he's even still on Coruscant." Obi-wan groaned. "After everything we went through to bring him in... he just slips away. And that's on top of everything else."

"Escaped Maul has, split the Order is, everything, the dark side surrounds," Yoda mused, so quietly they almost didn't hear him. The ancient master had often seemed lost in his thoughts as of late.

"Yes, the schism, I have some unfortunate news on that front too," said Ki-Adi-Mundi, his hologram sitting with arms crossed in annoyance. "I've confirmed this with Jedi generals on every front. We've all been assigned 'liaison officers.' Some fresh young army officer straight out of the academies now follows me around wherever I go outside of battle, 'for my convenience.' Officially, he's there to facilitate communication and cooperation between the Jedi Order and Grand Army of the Republic. Unofficially, he's clearly a spy. Tarkin has no trust for us now that he's got his own personal Jedi."

"This is not an optimal development," Mace Windu said. "Public opinion was already against us, but at least our command of the clone armies wasn't seriously challenged. Tarkin's making a move."

"Perhaps this is a good thing," said Shaak Ti. Everyone turned to stare at her.

Here it comes, Obi-wan thought. For weeks, Shaak Ti had been preparing to bring up her idea to the Council, and Obi-wan had promised to support it. He swallowed, and sat up straighter.

Shaak Ti took the plunge. "Masters, look at what's going on. Most of these defectors are padawans or young knights whose masters died in the previous four or so years of war. Those who aren't, are Jedi who have either been continuously deployed since the beginning or whose units have suffered massive casualties in battle, sometimes repeatedly. All these Jedi have been dealt terrible spiritual wounds. Is it any wonder they're joining the people who are telling them they can bring about the end of this awful war faster? Is it not clear that this war has poisoned an entire generation of Jedi?"

"A course of action, you propose?" Master Yoda asked.

"Quit the war, Master Yoda," said Shaak Ti.

No one spoke. Some were astounded, some shocked, some very carefully neutral. Obi-wan cleared his throat. "I agree," he said.

Now all eyes turned to him. "In conspiracy, are you two?" Yoda asked, with a tired smile. "Our two youngest, stirring the pot, they are."

"Idealism is the trait of the young," Mace Windu said. "Explain to me how exactly we quit the war."

"It's very simple," said Shaak Ti. "We put our lightsabers on our belts, get in our starships, and fly away."

"That's desertion," said Kit Fitso. "If we were clones, we'd be shot upon capture."

"Then perhaps we should fly somewhere very far from Coruscant," Shaak Ti said, as she sat back down.

Yoda laughed. Such an unheard sound coming from the ancient being momentarily stunned the council. How long had it been since they heard Yoda laugh? "Wonderfully simple, yes, wonderfully simple. Think I that young master Ti has a point, yes. Not soldiers, Jedi are. Wounded, the Jedi Order is. Split, are we. Good would it be, to withdraw and heal. Yes, young master Kenobi?"

"I can only agree with Master Ti," he said. "Our young ones *are* poisoned, and quite a few of us older ones too. Aspar does have several masters on his side. Four years of fighting has radicalized the most vulnerable among us, from masters like Jastus Farr right down to Agricorps workers like that girl I met on Agamar. This can't go on."

Ki-Adi-Mundi was very far from convinced. "So your idea is to pack up the entire Temple and fly it off to someplace far, far away, with all the Jedi who haven't joined Tarkin."

"Exactly," said Shaak Ti.

"Somehow, I don't think that's going to work," Kit Fitso said.

"What are they going to do, shoot us?" asked Obi-wan.

"Yes," Tarkin said, "yes, of course. Your work is very important for the Republic, Doctor Erso. Rebuilding war-torn planets will be our first priority when the Separatist rebellion is crushed. Project Stardust has nothing to do with weapons development, I assure you."

Even as he spoke, Tarkin made a note to change Project Stardust's designation as a weapons development program to a civilian power generation program in his personal files. With Maul hard at work investigating the Sith holocron, the need for a kyber crystal weapon was no more. Let Erso play with his crystals and try to find a way to make fusion and hypermatter obsolete.

"Thank you, Chancellor," Doctor Erso said through hologram connection. "Director Krennic has avoided giving me a clear answer in the past. Hearing it from you... is reassuring."

"Director Krennic has all the class of a sewer dianoga, I have no doubt he's dreamed up ways to weaponize your work. It won't be allowed to happen," said Tarkin.

Erso laughed. "I couldn't agree more, Chancellor."

Dealing with limp-wristed pacifists like Galen Erso was a trifling matter compared to what was next on his agenda. Jabba, the apparent outward face of the Hutts, had sent one of his Human minions to Coruscant to directly deal with the Republic. The man's name was Naroon Cuthus; he was old and hunched, but looked clever enough to survive Hutt politics. Cuthus may have been aged, but he was still tall, his wispy white hair contrasted with his dark complexion.

"I am honored to be here, Chancellor," said Cuthus, bowing. He wore gold rings on his fingers and gold bracelets at his wrists, inscribed with some kind of Huttese writing. "My lord, the great Jabba, sends his regards, and gratitude for the aid you've given to the mighty Hutt clans."

"There can hardly be a war without weapons," Tarkin said. He gestured for Cuthus to sit on the other side of the desk.

"Our preparations are going well, in fact, we are weeks ahead of schedule," said Cuthus. "All major pirate factions have either answered our call to arms or been eliminated."

"That's not what I've heard." Tarkin folded his hands, and gave the Hutt minion a cold stare. "I've been told a certain self-declared princess escaped from Circumtore a few days ago."

Cuthus's mouth twitched, the only tell he was annoyed at Tarkin's intelligence sources. "Same Sellero is no threat now," he said. *Same, rhymes with Padme,* thought Tarkin, as he wondered if the two women shared a common home. They both had laid claims to being royalty, after all. "The insolent child has been chastised. There is a matter we could use your help with though, Chancellor."

"Oh?"

The man pushed forward a little holoprojector, and the image of a hulking Barabel appeared. "This is Captain Buna, one of the few notable pirates to refuse our call. She was last seen on Raxus Secundus, and we've put out a contract on her. But no one knows where she's gone, she's vanished from the Galaxy. You wouldn't happen to know her whereabouts, would you, Chancellor?"

"I'm afraid I don't keep track of individual pirates," said Tarkin. "But I can alert our intelligence services to be on the lookout for her."

"We do not want her alive, Chancellor. She's too dangerous to capture. If your assassins find her, tell them to kill her. It's five million peggats to any man, woman, or machine that kills her. Your soldiers included."

Five million peggats was nothing to the Republic's budget, but Tarkin nodded. Until he had no need of the Hutts, he'd play along with them.

"Zoma V," said Voyan, holding a coolant tank dipping rod like a pointer and pointing at the hologram of the planet that currently occupied a large part of the mess hall, "is a very warm and wet planet. If you thought Zyggeria or Zeltros was humid, you haven't been to Zoma V."

Why do they all start with the letter zerek? Sanya wondered.

"Have you been there, sir?" asked Zule, raising her hand as she spoke.

Another zerek, thought Sanya. The Force was pulling every proper name that began with that letter into this moment.

Voyan shook his head. "No. It's not a civilized planet. There's nothing there of interest, unless you like huge insects and rain. And cat-people."

"I like huge insects," said Durm. "Lotta protein, you know?"

"Gross," Sanya muttered.

"I have never seen atmospheric precipitation," Purity Alpha said.

The remarks were ignored by the presenter. "Zoma V is the home of the Felinians, an... interesting race. We have someone related to them on this ship right now, who knows more about them than I do."

Lieutenant Oto stood up, and joined Voyan at the projection. "The Felinians are related to us Cathar," she said, a disdainful look on her face. "We do not like to admit it, but it's true. They are a frivolous, primitive, and unchaste race, sub-Cathar in their nature. Our historians tell us that a Human scientist came to our planet a thousand years ago, and lured numerous runtish and poor Cathar women to his ship. He promised them a new life, free of all the alleged problems of our kind."

"Like what?" asked Alize, who leaned forward, ears at full alert.

Oto regarded her coldly. "Cathar men are prone to hysterics. Men who hold territory must fight off men who would take it from them. Including their own sons. Put a threat near a man and he goes berserk. Therefore our men are cloistered away, for everyone's safety, including their own. We women make sure everything works as it should and, if we are strong and swift and smart, make a place for ourselves in a clan. The Human scientist targeted women who lacked these qualities. The runts, like I said. And when he had a few hundred, he and his cronies put them on their starship and flew off, to Zoma V. This scientist had a lab there, from what we can tell from the ruins. Genetic analysis indicates the Felinians are a deliberate cross of Human and Cathar."

"And it couldn't be more obvious to the eye," said Voyan. "Felinians are outwardly Human, but for their ears, tails, teeth, and eyes."

"They are an abomination," declared Oto, slamming her fist in her palm. "A race created in a lab, to be pleasure-slaves of sick degenerates, cursed with unending libido and far too much open-mindedness."

By now, the crew were familiar with Oto's entirely justified and very personal hatred for slavers. But her anti-Felinian bias had Sanya skeptical, with good reason.

"So the Cathar say," Voyan said.

"So we say," agreed Oto. "I will not be going down to Zoma. Their wretched little planet doesn't deserve to be graced by a true Cathar. I will not walk among that most ignoble race of meat-toys."

Buna cackled. "Meat-toys, sounds delicious! Too bad it's so damn hot. Average yearly temperature is twenty degrees, countin' nights and poles! Ol' Buna is tough, but not that tough."

"My home planet's average yearly temperature is *three* degrees," Esera said, frowning at the hologram.

Zule turned to look at her, one among many surprised that their usually quiet captain had said something. "Is that why it's so cold on this ship? Captain?"

"Cold? This ain't nothin'!" said Buna. "You don't know *real* cold, Zeltron. Captain Jedi's keepin' it nice and toasty for us in here."

"Stalimur has extensive glaciation and large landmasses at both poles, and Barab has no major bodies of water, all life–including Barabels–is only active on the surface during the freezing cold nights," Voyan said, like a professor at lecture. "Zoma has no ice sheets whatsoever. The extreme polar regions get some snow in the winter, but that's it. The rest of the planet is covered in seas, swamps, and rainforests. Usually, these are not far from the sea. The continents are small and scattered, facilitating warm ocean currents traveling the circumference of the planet."

"How miserable," said Sanya. Swamps were something Sanya knew, from an assignment before the war. Leeches, flies, biting things, and mud, mud, mud. She'd be staying far away from any swamp. But something Oto had said had sparked her interest. *A race bred as pleasure-slaves, huh?* thought Sanya. *That's something you don't come across every day...*

"What do you know about the Felinians themselves?" she asked.

"Primitive, uncouth, promiscuous," said Oto, rolling her eyes.

Voyan had a more serious answer: "They're as social as Zeltrons. Masculinity and femininity are not aspects firmly tied to one's sex. They've been marooned on this planet for a millennium with little outside contact, and that millennium has not been kind. Contrary to what Lieutenant Oto says, there is nothing runtish or submissive about these people. Only the clever and quick survive on Zoma."

Of course, Sanya wanted to go down immediately. Given that this system was not a war zone, Esera decided to give everyone who wanted shore leave a chance to come down to the planet. Everyone, except Oto, Klaud, and Buna, wished to go. Zoma V was dangerously hot for Barabels, Klaud was apparently disinclined towards rain, and the Cathar had no love for their Felinian cousins.

Sanya accosted Voyan in the hangar as they loaded up the big *Maxillipede* transport shuttle, full of cargo they'd gotten from Khan's fleet at Druckenwell, and more they'd picked up at Siskeen. "What exactly are you guys doing down there?" she asked him.

"Military secret," Voyan told her, looking at a checklist on his datapad.

"It's a base, isn't it?"

The Human man gave her a suspicious glare.

"Look, I've spent a lot of time setting up bases on underdeveloped planets. Water purifiers? Micro-fusion generators? Shield units? Automated defense turrets? It's pretty obvious," Sanya said. "So the real question is, why are you building a base in the middle of nowhere in Hutt Space?"

"You're a sharp gardener, Sanya, you tell me," Voyan said as he got back to his checklist.

"Buna says something's happening in Hutt Space. All the pirate crews are disappearing. Not dead, no, gathering somewhere. Anyone who doesn't join is getting killed. They tried to kill Buna, after all. Buna said some lady named Sellero blasted her way out of that ring-world, Circumtore, last week, after the Hutts there tried to seize her and her ships. Things are getting hectic out there. Something big *is* going down in Hutt Space. And you Separatists need to be ready for it. So you're building a base in a place the Hutts would never look." Sanya put her hands on her hips, and smirked. "How's that, for a gardener?"

"Not bad, not bad at all," said Voyan. "Still not a Separatist yourself?"

"My loyalty is to Esera, not the politicians on Raxus, and certainly not that horrible machine who locked me up and read my diary for two months." She sighed. "I wish Esera would stop being so... well, Esera, about what happened between us, though."

"Yeah, I wish Esera wasn't so Esera too, sometimes-" Voyan stopped, glanced around, and dropped his voice. "Don't tell her I used her first name when she wasn't around. I got used to it on Emberlene."

"Oh no, the first officer of the ship is on a first name basis with the captain of the ship, the scandal! Someone think of the children!" Sanya burst into giggles.

The engineer gave her a rude gesture, not amused in the slightest. "Go play in the dirt with your plants, kid."

"I'm on my way down now, Grievous," said Esera, holding a little holoprojector in the palm of her hand, where a little ghostly General Grievous stood, an impatient talon tapping away.

"*You were supposed to be there a day ago,*" Grievous told her.

"It takes time to move supplies between ships, and I sent a team down to investigate Druckenwell," Esera told him. "They said it was empty, even for a war-zone. Suspiciously empty."

"*Did they not find bodies?*"

"None."

"*Have your sources investigate this. An entire city cannot disappear into thin air.*" With his orders given, Grievous cut off the transmission. Esera looked over to Voyan, who was sitting in one of the seats behind the pilot droids of the *Maxillipede* shuttle.

"If you're wondering about any secret tunnels, I wasn't aware of them," Voyan said. And that was all he had to offer on *that* subject.

Crammed into the *Maxillipede* was most of *Encounter*'s crew, most of whom hadn't stepped foot on a planet or breathed non-recycled air since they set off from Raxus a month ago, barring the dusty skies of Druckenwell's urban ruins. That was even worse than recycled air, Esera knew that from experience. Also with them were the two magnaguards, a platoon of deactivated, folded-up security droids, and the first load of supplies that would go towards building a permanent Separatist presence on Zoma V.

But Zoma V had no spaceport. It didn't even have landing pads. Pirates and slavers were known to visit this planet from time to time, they simply landed on whatever dry ground they could find. Esera didn't have that option, she needed to get as close to the base's chosen site as possible, which was on a hill a kilometer from a major Felinian settlement. Luckily, the *Maxillipede* came with a kit to retrofit its landing claws with wide pads for touch-down on soft terrain.

The first blast of fresh air always came as a, well, a breath of fresh air. Smelling something besides ship-smells and the staleness of recycled, scrubbed air was a novelty. When the shuttle's landing ramp deployed, it was as if they were deploying into a hot shower. Zygerria, Zeltros, and Emberlene had all been sticky-wet, with how humid it was, but this was something else entirely. Zoma's air was thick with moisture, and carried with it the scent of green things and decaying things, and as stray raindrops began to find their way into the shuttle bay, Esera felt the peculiar sensation of hot air and warm water on her skin at the same time.

"Reminds me of Ohma-D'un," Zule muttered, a frown on her face. The moon where she'd lost her master and her arm to Asajj Ventress.

"Try Devaron," Sanya said.

"A whole lot more water than Zygerria," said Alize, coming up behind Esera. She put her hands on her shoulders. "How are you feeling, Esera?"

"Um, fine," Esera said, trying to wriggle away. "I'm not going to melt if it's above fifteen degrees, you know."

"Just making sure, dear."

Meanwhile, Purity had ventured down the ramp, heedless of the pouring rain coming down on her bare head. Everyone else had rain jackets or cloaks. "Captain Esera Komara, we have landed in several centimeters of water."

"I hope you all brought boots!" Sanya laughed, and stomped down the shuttle ramp for effect. "Esera's Sephi friends didn't want me buying these, but I never go anywhere without a good pair of boots. Let's go meet the Felinians!"

Purity was not wearing boots. As mechanically pragmatic as Khan, Purity took off her shoes and rolled her pants up to the knee, and went into the muck barefoot, entranced by how the mud squelched between her toes.

Esera, her military crew, and Murshida had nothing to worry about. That left Alize, who'd come down to the planet in sandals. The big Zygerrian sighed, and followed Purity's example. *I knew a skirt was a good idea,* thought Esera, as she gathered hers up and trod along merrily through the mire, soiling only her boots and bare shins with mud.

"You'd never guess that girl was Grievous's right hand," Esera heard Zule say to the men.

"That girl is your captain, ensign," Durm said back.

The Force was with them, the muddy water ended only a hundred meters from the clearing the shuttle had landed in. The ground was still soggy, but at least it wasn't underwater. "I thought there'd at least be a path," Alize grumbled as she wiped her feet on a frond of some plant.

"Look at the size of these things," gasped Sanya. She and Purity were inspecting the massive trunk of a squat tree. Or, it looked like a tree. Its bark was like scales, and it had a huge fountain of green fronds sprouting from the top. "They must be centuries old!"

They didn't have far to go before they met the Felinians. One moment, the rainforest was empty but for *Encounter*'s party, the next, they were surrounded by Felinians. As Voyan and Oto had told them earlier, Esera saw that these were Humans with cat-like characteristics. They had cat ears, and cat tails, and cat eyes, and even cat fangs, but they were Human at core. The Felinians, while well-armed, had not raised their weapons, a motley collection of blasters, slugthrowers, spears, and axes. Many were also tattooed, in swirling blue patterns, the more swirls one had seemed to correspond with age.

"Which one of you is Lady Komara?" asked the lead Felinian, a young woman with sand-colored hair. *And fur,* Esera noticed, eyeing those fuzzy triangular ears pointed straight at them.

"I am," she said, stepping forward.

"You are awaited. These others are not," said the woman. She was one of the few with a blaster, and her finger drifted near the trigger.

"These are my crew," Esera told her. "You would be wise not to harm them."

"You bring strange beings to us, Lady Komara. Some are not unlike the foreign slavers who attack us." At the Felinian woman's uttering of *slaver,* Alize's own ears twitched back. This was not lost on the Felinians, whose eyes all turned to Alize. The woman tilted her head. "In fact, that big one looks *exactly* like one of the slaver-parties who have attacked us."

"They're no kin of mine," Alize said, before Esera could say anything. She put a hand on the Zygerrian's shoulder.

"Those slavers were fortunate enough to be born the same species as Alize here. She has nothing to do with them," said Esera. "She is a mother and a cook, not a criminal."

The Felinian woman's nose twitched, and her ears laid back a little. "Truly, the world beyond us is a strange place. Come, Lady Komara, my father wishes you an audience with him."

"Some names would help, Felinian," said Esera.

"Miha Meo, daughter of Lakau Meo," the Felinian said. *Miha Meo. Miha.* For a moment, all diplomatic sense fled Esera's mind, and all she could remember was a strange moment in the painkiller-fueled haze in *Invisible Hand*'s medbay, when she'd met an irreplaceable person she might even call a friend.

Esera spun around, almost toppling over on the soggy soil, and pointed an accusing finger at Voyan. "I told you! I *told* you!"

A second passed, before Voyan's blank stare turned into a glare, a rare blush on his face. "I am *not* from Zoma, Captain," he said, through grit teeth. The Felinian woman, Miha Meo, blinked, one ear drooping, and her comrades looked much the same. *Encounter*'s crew was at a loss.

"Um, what? Captain?" asked Zule.

Voyan put a hand over his face. "One of the first things the Captain ever said to me was that I had a girl's name."

"Oh, I get it!" Alize clapped her hands. "Miha Voyan, Miha Meo! It's like poetry-"

Into the conversation stepped Purity, dripping wet from the rain, and completely unphased. She raised a finger and did a scarily close impression of her creator's mannerisms, if not his voice: "The odds of encountering another living being with the same name as oneself are incredibly high in a galaxy with trillions of individuals. The limited phonology of many Human and near-Human languages ensures there are multiple individuals with the same name. It is inevitable for two of one name to meet should one travel long enough. I am certain there is at least one other Purity Alpha in existence, and should I live to an undefined age, I will eventually meet her."

"Thank you Purity, very cool," said Sanya, the lone voice in Purity's befuddled audience.

"If we're done with foreign learning, might we continue to my father's domain?" asked Miha Meo, eyebrow raised.

"Lead the way," said Esera. She couldn't stop smiling, she was so giddy. *Miha Meo! Oh, it's too perfect!*

Lakau Meo's domain was a wooden village with cut plant-fronds for roofs. The rain rolled right down the plant-matter. Every building was mounted in stilts, as the village was built in a swamp. Felinians rowed and paddled little bowl-shaped boats to and from each house and hall. It was impossibly quaint.

The Felinian dress code seemed to correlate more with role in the village than gender. In fact, she wasn't convinced she could tell a male and female Felinian apart immediately, the men didn't seem to grow facial or body hair. Men and women alike wore blue ribbons, in their hair, on their tails, and on their clothes. Like the blue spiral tattoos, the amount of ribbons seemed to correlate with age. No one wore pants or trousers or shorts of any kind. The warriors who had brought them in all wore short kilts or skirts, the men were bare-chested, the women just had something to barely preserve their modesty. Esera would have never been caught dead in such an outfit. But the other villagers wore tunics and dresses; still short, but with a lot more top covering. *Maybe it's so they can wade through water with less hassle,* thought Esera. She still wouldn't wear either kind of garment, though. Stalimurian fashion was far more to her taste.

Esera soon noticed something disturbing, too: there was a lack of youth in this village. There were the infants and very young children, and then the middle-aged and elderly. But there were too few teenagers, too few young adults, too few Felinian parents for all the little ones in the village. *Slavers*, Miha Meo had said. A sick and angry feeling came over Esera as she realized just why so many young Felinians were absent. Those blasters and slugthrowers were probably taken from the slavers they'd managed to kill, all they had otherwise were barbarian tools from the times when people rode in wheeled machines.

Inside the largest house on stilts was Lakau Meo, chieftain of the Felinians in this region. He was a huge man, built like a tournament power-lifter, shoulders broad, arms thick, and core bulky. There was nothing pretty about Lakau Meo, unlike his daughter with her Zule Xiss-like warrior's beauty, nor his other daughter, a cute, reedy girl who wore a modest dress and lacked all of her sister's musculature. Both had sandy blonde hair cut short, while the father's had gone white, and spilled down his back. Whoever the mother was, the children had her looks, that was for sure. In nothing but his kilt and swirling blue

tattoos, Lakau Meo made an imposing if somewhat awkward sight, sitting on a mere wooden stool in his hall. Rain pounded on the frond roof above, but nothing got through. The only dripping came from Esera and her party's cloaks, and one thoroughly soaked biodroid. The hall was lit in a pale gold light, coming from hanging lamps that glowed steadily but had no apparent power source.

"So, this is the Lady Komara that the death demon sent us," said Lakau, his voice deep and gravelly.

Death demon? Grievous is going to love that one. "I am General Grievous's envoy," Esera said. "My instructions are to assist you however I can as I oversee the construction of a Confederate naval base on your planet."

Lakau leaned forward, arms on his knees. "Guns and ships," he said. And nothing more.

"Excuse me?" asked Esera.

"Guns and ships, Lady Komara. We Felinians are a proud people. Our pride has been wounded by these Hutts, like the one you have brought into my hall." He nodded towards Alize, whose ears flattened and who boiled with sudden anger in the Force. *He thinks Alize is a Hutt!? What's Grievous been telling these people!?* "We do not need the soulless iron warriors of Confedersy, only guns and ships with which to defend ourselves."

"*Confederacy*, father," the slim and slight daughter whispered to Lakau. He ignored her.

Esera took a deep breath. "With all due respect, lord Meo, there are some issues I need to clear up before we talk any further. Alize is a Zygerrian, not a Hutt." She pointed to Alize, whose height and girth didn't do anything to make her look less imposing, even if she was as gentle as a fambaa. And as big. "I do not discount the possibility of Zygerrians among Hutt-employed slavers, I'm sure many escaped from their home planet when I overthrew their government." *Let that sink in,* Esera thought.

Lakau leaned back now, a very careful expression on his face, though in the Force it was easy to tell he was more curious than confrontational.

"Furthermore, my mission is to build a *naval base*," Esera went on. "These ships are under the command of living flesh and blood beings just like you. They will rely on that base for supplies, and as a safe place to retreat to. Iron warriors will not be fighting for you. If you make a good impression with the ship captains, they might even take aboard your warriors to help them fight the Hutts. Because that is our ultimate goal here."

"How big are these ships?" asked Lakau. "The ones the slavers come in could crush a dozen houses beneath their bellies."

Esera looked at Voyan, who cleared his throat. "Lord Meo, the base we intend to build would have a landing pad capable of serving ships up to three hundred meters in length."

The old Felinian warrior leaned over to his less-built daughter. "Shau, what's a meter?"

"It's an off-worlder measurement, father. Three hundred meters is about nine hundred and eighty-four feet," said Shau. Miha Meo smirked from where she stood, on the other side of their father.

Esera did her own lean over to her engineer, who was regarding Shau with sudden interest. "Voyan, what's a feet?"

"A *foot* is an archaic unit of length, roughly the length of, well, a Human foot. I think." said Voyan.

"A thousand foot ship!" Lakau Meo slapped his knee, and grinned. "Truly, you star-people are incredible. Perhaps I will allow this base to be built, so these vessels can come to Zoma. But what of my guns?"

Just wait until he hears about the eleven-hundred meter destroyer in orbit... "Guns can be provided, as payment for building a base on your lands," said Esera.

"How many? How big? What color do they shoot? I want the strongest color."

"Um... the number and type of gun can be negotiated. My people can give you a rundown. As for color, um..." Again, Esera looked to Voyan. *Help me!* But it was Purity who stepped forward, making an elegant bow as her waterlogged hair slid around her shoulder.

"If it pleases my lord, I can answer: A blaster fires an invisible bolt of energy," said Purity. "Color is added to the bolt, to trace it. This tracer color is commonly red, for high contrast with the typical green, brown, and grey terrain of terrestrial planets like this one. Our enemy, the Galactic Republic, uses blue and green, to contrast against our red. Other colors exist as well. Of course, you can simply dispense with the tracer color and fire the invisible bolts. But a blaster without a tracer color makes determining impact locations difficult for those without acute vision and estimation abilities: a blaster bolt only leaves a small scorch mark, sometimes impossible to see for the unaided eye at long distances."

The Felinians in the hall considered her words, and many nodded. "You travel with companions wise in lore, Lady Komara," Lakau said. "We will discuss my terms later. For now, let us feast, for you are guests beneath my roof and have come many miles to see us!"

Just what a mile was escaped Esera. She couldn't help but smile though. Diplomacy and food seemed to go hand in hand, and only a fool refused free food.

"There is good news and bad news, General," said the lead Quarren engineer of the *Oceana* project. Grievous, Captain Harsol, and the design team were in the same conference room where *Oceana* had been finalized, months ago. Today, the Quarren looked even more nervous than before.

"I do not like bad news," Grievous told them, looming over him.

"No, of course not, General, of course not. Um, the good news is that we've solved most of the issues discovered in last week's test flight. The bad news is..." The engineer trailed off, and Captain Harsol stepped in.

"The bad news is the vibrations cannot be fixed without a total redesign of the engine mounting cradles in the structural framing," said Harsol. The Human was professional as always, at least, delivering the bad news with a straight face and calm demeanor.

If Grievous had eyebrows, he would have raised one. "A total redesign?" he asked.

Something deep inside Harsol must have wanted to die right now, but it only showed as the tiniest of flinches. "Yes, General. Many sections of *Oceana* are modular, but not the engine complex. To get at the mountings for the eight engines we'd have to tear half the ship apart. We might as well build a new one at that point."

"Bah! There is no time for that. Continue production as planned, once you have a solution to the engine vibrations implement it in every hull you can from then on," said Grievous.

"Only a few dozen ships will suffer from this problem, General," said the Quarren.

"So be it."

With those words Grievous left for his flagship, where he had another meeting by hologram scheduled. Most of the Head of State's day was spent in meetings or reading reports and issuing responses. At least this meeting would be interesting.

The hologram of Clothar Aclinde appeared, the Carammite spymaster, as short and balding as ever. "Good day, General," he said, with a polite bow. "I've prepared everything you requested."

"At least you deliver on your promises, Aclinde," Grievous growled, sitting down at his desk.

"That is my job, General. You will see before you the complete outline of Vice Chancellor Sate Pestage's day-to-day affairs, as far as my sources on Coruscant can tell," Aclinde said. "If you're going to kill him, you'll only have a small window to do so."

"Who said we were killing him?" asked Grievous, eyes narrowed.

"Assassination is one of my specialties, General. I know a target when I see one."

"How astute." Grievous folded his hands together. "Yes, I want Pestage dead."

Aclinde looked at his shoes, for a moment, before his eyes turned back up. "General, do I need to explain to you what kind of precedent this will set? If you kill a Loyalist government official in their own capital, they will kill a Separatist on Raxus. You'll be declaring open season on all people of importance. Including yourself. No one will be safe."

"I do not fear for my life," Grievous said.

"Many of your own people do."

"Including you?"

"Of course," said Aclinde, with a thin smile. "Besides, what did Pestage ever do to you?"

For a brief moment, Grievous was going to tell Aclinde about how Pestage was one of Sidious's associates. *No,* he told himself. *I have a pact with Komara. Destroying the Sith plan is our secret. No one else must ever know.* "I do not like his face," said Grievous.

The Carammite laughed. "Sometimes, General, you remind me very much of old Ado Eemon. I'll activate one of my sleepers on Coruscant, and see what we can do to get rid of this guy. There is something I'd like to bring up, though."

"Speak."

"Are you familiar with the plight of Mandalore?"

"No."

"There's unrest on the planet. It's been almost a year now, since the Republic invaded and deposed Almec. There are whispers the Republic may be stepping up its occupation to keep the beskar shipments moving." Aclinde clasped his hands. "I don't know about you, General, but this sounds like the perfect opportunity to cause big trouble with a little force."

Grievous's mind was already in motion. "Yes... yes, it does."

While Esera, Voyan, and Purity helped Lakau Meo select his desired weapons from the Separatist arsenal building up at Siskeen, Durm and Zule lead the droids in constructing the new naval base, on pillars above a large rock outcrop the Felinians had no use for. Alize and Sanya took note of Felinian agriculture, animal husbandry, and cuisine, often accompanied by Murshida.

"I don't mind the help, Mister Murshida," said Alize, as they watched some local children round up fish from a pond, "but you don't eat meat."

"Indeed," agreed the Skakoan. "Even if my people were omnivores, I would remain vegetarian. I like animals. I do not want to eat them."

"I'm right with you there," said Sanya.

Alize shook her head. "You don't know what you're missing out on."

"Protein, I suppose!" Murshida said with a chuckle.

Felinian food was light, which made sense, they lived in a comfortably toasty environment. They ate lots of greens, fruits, and nuts that required minimal preparation, and they had a taste for raw fish and shellfish meat, prepared very carefully. Alize was hooked right away. Raw meat seemed even less appetizing than cooked meat to Sanya, but Esera didn't mind.

"It's alright," she said, after eating what looked like a freshwater clam raw. *She really will eat anything,* Sanya thought. Meal times were the only time anyone saw Esera in anything approaching a good mood, though. The damp heat of Zoma V was not agreeing with her.

The communal meals with the Felinians were leading to some interesting conversations, in Sanya's opinion. Especially when something pulled one of the levers programmed into Zule by the Jabiimis. She made a sudden interjection one evening when the subject of land ownership came up.

"Let me tell you about dialectical materialism," said Zule, to Miha and Shau Meo, children of the Felinian chieftain. They could hardly have been more unlike. Miha was tall, athletic, and boyish. Shau was short, slim, and girly. Like many of the unarmed Felinians in the village, Shau's sandy-blonde hair and tail had blue ribbons for decoration. Miha's did not, but she did have the blue tattoos all the warriors had. If Sanya had to guess, people who didn't fight wore the ribbons. *Maybe I should ask Voyan, he's been spending a lot of time with Shau...* It wasn't hard to see why. Shau was also the prettier of the two siblings, much softer in features than big sister Miha.

"I have no idea what... diabolic maternity... is," Miha said, one of her ears drooping.

"Don't worry about it, she's brainwashed," said the other Miha, more formally known as Commander Voyan.

"I have never heard of this either," said Miha. Now both her ears were down.

Zule leaned in over the table. "Basically, objective reality is made of matter. It's material. And this creates the material, technological, and social conditions that drive history. In these conditions there are contradictions, contradictions that must be rectified by rearranging the material, technological, and social conditions. Take, for instance, your father owning this village and everything around it. The fish ponds, the rice paddies, the berry bogs, the woods where you hunt game, the cleared places where you graze livestock. Your father is the sole owner of these means of production. The rest of your village has nothing."

"That's the way it's always been," said Miha. Shau listened in, silent, but contemplative. "Our father is the strongest warrior, the strongest own the land. But he can't work it all alone. If the village helps harvest the crops and hunt the animals and defend the lands, then our village gets to share in the reward. It's very fair."

"Is it though?" asked Zule. "Why should the land belong to one family? Everyone lives on the land, it should belong to everyone."

Before the rogue agent of the Jabiimi National Worker's Party managed to ruin the Separatist alliance with the Felinians, Sanya stepped in. "Okay, Miha and Shau, watch this. Hey, Zule."

"Yeah?" asked Zule.

"If objective reality is material, then how do you explain the Force?" Zule opened her mouth, closed it, and began to stare at her plate. Sanya giggled. "See? You can short-circuit her brainwashing that easily."

The Felinian duo were still lost. "The Force? Short-circuits?" asked Miha. "You're still not making sense."

"The Force is magic," Voyan said. "And a short-circuit is an electrical problem."

"When a circuit makes a connection you don't want it to make," said Shau, voice light and soft. "Right, Mister Voyan?"

"Exactly right," Voyan said, patting Shau's shoulder. *I had a feeling something was sparking here,* thought Sanya.

"Clever girl, Shau," said Sanya. "You learn fast!"

Miha Meo *and* Miha Voyan both gave Sanya an amused look, and Shau Meo sighed. "I'm a boy, you know," said Shau.

"You didn't see that?" asked Zule, recovering just as Sanya was thrown for a loop.

"Oh," Sanya said. "Um. Sorry. It's just, you're... well, you're really pretty, and the ribbons in your hair had me thinking, and none of you have any facial hair... It's all a bit confusing for an outsider like me."

"The ribbons are for non-combatants, back when tribes had wars. Tattoos are for us warriors, we can't take them off. You can always take off a ribbon to fight, but you can't take off a tattoo to hide," said Miha. She put a strong arm around Shau's slight shoulders. "This little runt here wouldn't stand a chance in a fight, he's got no choice but to wear the ribbons. But he makes himself useful in other ways."

"Like what?" asked Sanya, her mind instantly going somewhere lewd. There were a lot of useful things a boy who looked like a girl could do. But she had the feeling Felinian gender norms weren't at all like those she was familiar with.

"I'm the bookkeeper," Shau said. "I keep track of everything the village has. Weapons, herds, sacks of rice, you name it."

"And not only is Shau a bookkeeper, he's an *exceptional* bookkeeper. His talents are wasted here," Voyan said.

"Mister Voyan thinks I could have been very successful out in the Galaxy," said Shau.

"Shau, you independently created a long division algorithm when you were fourteen. If you'd been raised with a Galactic-standard education..." Voyan shook his head. "It's a waste of talent."

"Is this why you two have been hanging out?" Sanya asked.

"Apparently I'm gifted when it comes to numbers," said Shau, with a shrug.

Sanya groaned. "And here I was hoping Voyan had finally found a nice girl."

"Maybe he found a nice boy," Miha Meo suggested, giggling. Shau Meo's cheeks went red.

"No, it's not like that!" he said. "Sorry, Mister Voyan, you're not ugly, but I just don't see you like that! Maybe if you were Miss Voyan, I don't know..." The Felinian boy trailed off, staring intently at anything but the people at the table, ears flat back, looking like he was ready to melt.

"My interest in Shau is not romantic," said Voyan, who was very much not melting down. "This young man is brilliant, I'm telling you. He could have gone to the academies of Yag'Dhul in another life. Instead he's counting fish."

"I like counting fish," Shau mumbled. But even Sanya's weak Force sensitivity picked up that he'd left something unsaid. *I wish I was stronger in the Force,* thought Sanya, glancing at Zule.

When everyone was settling in for the night, she asked the Zeltron what she'd felt from Shau right then.

"He wants out of here," said Zule. "He feels stuck. And embarrassed. The Meo family is a lineage of great warriors. But Shau clearly isn't cut out for that. He's a liability, I think that's what he feels. When the slavers came, he had to hide while his family fought." Zule looked out into the warm, rainy night from the little hut they shared, staring out over the village full of those strange glowing lamps. She sat, chin on her knees, a gloomy expression on her face. "I don't even need the Force to tell you he wishes he could do something more. I've been in his shoes. I know what it's like to be helpless. To be too weak to save who you care about."

"Never would have guessed," Sanya said, as she remembered how Zule had beaten her down in the Initiate Trials back at the Temple.

"Yeah, I know. Zule Xiss? Weak? But it's the truth." Zule squirmed where she sat. "Esera said something to me once, after she defeated me in a duel, the first day I was on the ship. She told me I was going to live with that shame of losing. I'd live every day knowing I wasn't strong enough to win. And one day maybe I'd realize there's more to strength than power."

The two of them were quiet for a time, reflecting on the lesson of a girl they both had a rocky relationship with. Eventually, Zule found the words to continue: "I didn't know it then, but I think that's what I needed to hear. I *had* power, I thought. But every time, its failed me. I started thinking, maybe Esera is right, maybe there is more to strength than power. Miha–the Human, not the Felinian–asked me what I thought someone strong could do. If I'd been strong, I could have saved my master. I could have saved the Jabiimi who was with me on my mission. And Miha got me to see that for me, strength is protecting, healing, fixing... creating. I realized, what I'm doing right now, this is my calling. This is my strength. I don't need a lightsaber to be strong, I don't need to fight to be strong. Every time I try I get hurt, others get hurt. So I heal, I fix, I build. I create instead of destroy. That's strength to me, Sanya. Esera was right, there is more to strength than power. And I think that's something Shau needs to learn too."

"She's not the only one who's changed since we were in the Temple," said Sanya. Privately, she wondered how much Jabiimi collectivism informed Zule's new beliefs. From the political lectures Zule launched into, Sanya knew the National Worker's Alliance put a strong emphasis on building and creating, especially in a group effort. *But then again,* Sanya thought, *maybe this is something that's always been in Zule all along. They don't teach mechanical engineering or construction at the Temple. How could anyone have ever known?*

"You ever gonna patch things up with her?" asked Zule, suddenly.

"I'd love to... if she let me," Sanya said. She sighed.

"You need to understand just how deep a betrayal it was for her, learning what you told her," said Zule. "I feel it whenever you two are in the same room. She's angry, yeah, but beneath that is hurt. Never mind that you're your own person, to her, you were her best friend from back then. You did a lot more for her than you realize. To find out you didn't see things the same way... well, it's silly of her, but given what we both are..."

"What are you, Zule?"

"We're traumatized child soldiers tricked into thinking we weren't allowed to feel. Miha says he's surprised neither of us have had a nervous breakdown." Zule smirked a little, but there was nothing happy in her eyes. "I came really close, to be honest. I mean, I was on the *edge*, you know? Esera Komara, though, who the hell knows what goes on in her head. I had a few months of combat before the Jabiimis killed me and put me back together again. She's had over three straight years of it. Once the pressure of this war is off her, Miha thinks she's going to fall apart. Like a deep sea fish pulled to the surface, he says."

"Yeah, that happens," Sanya said. "Same reason why Mister Murshida can't take his suit off out here."

"Huh. That makes sense, I guess. But what I'm saying is, fix things up with her. I mean, it's really not my problem, but it is a bit distracting. Really distracting. Being a Zeltron and a Jedi at the same time... well, I feel other people's feelings about as much as I feel my own."

"Never would have guessed," said Sanya.

"I've spent my whole life trying to ignore it," Zule said. "Now I'm learning how to live with it."

Life went on in the Felinian village. The youths were fascinated by the alien visitors, the elders wary. It was hard to blame them, until now their alien contacts had been slavers, taking their children away forever, for short lives of soul-crushing misery and horrific abuse. There was a deep resentment in the village, and many Felinians, young and old alike, were ready to take off their blue ribbons and join the battle against the hated Hutts. Not that they knew what a Hutt was. But after a few days, the Felinians had figured their visitors weren't Hutts or slavers, and were here to fight their enemies.

Sanya paid particular attention to Felinian social habits. They were a hands-on people... and they weren't afraid to show it. Felinians didn't have a concept of personal space, not between males, not between females, and not between mixed company. There was nothing romantic about a boy and girl holding hands, walking arm in arm, Sanya learned; that's just what friends did in this culture. Voyan was finding out just how touchy a friendly, trusting Felinian could be while talking math with Shau. *They really are just like cats,* thought Sanya.

However, it was not to say such physical intimacy couldn't lead to romance. The Felinians were not shy about public affection. And given that the huts of the village were made of wood and leaves and were not solid in the slightest to facilitate air flow, amorous encounters between Felinians were hardly private. None of the locals cared. This was a cause of consternation to certain members of *Encounter*'s crew. All of them, in fact, except for Sanya and Purity.

"I'm not a prude like Esera and our Miha," whispered Alize one evening, as *Encounter*'s women brushed their teeth at the communal fountain, "but you'd think they'd be a bit more subtle!"

"Do they have any shame?" asked Zule.

Knowing what I know now, thought Sanya, *it makes sense that Zule's so repressed.*

"Evidently not," said Purity. "There is no taboo on expressing sexuality in this culture."

"I like it," said Sanya. "I just wish they were more open to non-Felinians..."

"Of course you do!" Zule said. "Gutter-brain..."

Esera wasn't saying anything. She didn't even look like she was listening. The girl was leaning against the fountain, a hand on her head. *Is she alright?* Sanya asked herself, frowning in worry. But she couldn't say anything, Esera was *still* mad at her and that probably wasn't a bridge she wanted to cross yet. Luckily, Alize was looking out too.

"Are you alright, dear?" the big Zygerrian asked.

"Huh? What-?" Esera whipped upright, but winced and brought both hands to her head, growling in the most unladylike language. "I *hate* this place."

"What's wrong, Esera?" asked Alize.

"Nothing!" Esera snapped. "I'm fine. Goodnight."

And then she was gone. *Is it that time of the month?* Sanya wondered. *I don't envy Purity, having to share a room with her while we're down here...*

Shaak Ti's proposal had definitely stirred things up on the Council, just as much as the news of Maul's escape had. Those who supported the status quo, like Mace Windu and Ki-Adi-Mundi, seemed to have the upper hand, but an event transpired several days later that shook the Council greatly. A chrome-plated star-skiff from Naboo requested permission to dock at the Temple hangar. Only two individuals were currently allowed to use such a ship: the monarch of Naboo, and Senator Padme Amidala. Obi-wan Kenobi knew which of the two was more likely to visit. He knew because he'd been expecting her. He made sure he was the Jedi Master of rank in the hangar when the ship touched down.

"Padme," Obi-wan said, striding up the ship where their guest was walking down the ramp, "it's so good to see you!"

"It's been too long, Obi-wan," Padme said, with a warm smile. She hugged him, and Obi-wan sensed that under her friendly demeanor still lurked remorse at Anakin's passing, and an even greater weariness towards the world. "I haven't seen you since..."

"It's been nearly a year," said Obi-wan. *She still can't bring herself to say 'Anakin's cremation,'* he thought. "I take it this has to do with what we talked about the other week?"

"Yes. Our mutual acquaintance, Esera Komara, turned out to be honest, just as you thought."

"Well, she's many things, but she's not a liar." Obi-wan tried to offer a friendly smirk, but his heart wasn't quite up for it. Whenever Esera Komara came into play, interesting things tended to happen. And Obi-wan was intimately familiar with the old curse, *'may you live in interesting times.'* Times could afford to be far less interesting, right now.

"She gave me something I thought you'd be interested in," said Padme. She waved to one of the Naboo security officers who'd come with her, and they brought down a repulsorlift gurney. On it was a clone trooper, a few weeks unshaven, laying still, eyes closed, a tube dripping nutrients into a vein in his arm.

"Oh? What's-" Obi-wan reached out to put his hand on the clone's head, but recoiled when he felt the dark side on the clone.

"This is Alpha-82, an ARC trooper. And something's happened to him," said Padme, hand on chin. "Something evil. You sense it, don't you?"

"I think you'd better come with us to the infirmary," said Obi-wan.

Master Vokara Che, the blue-eyed blue-skinned Twi'lek, old enough to be Obi-wan's grandmother, wasted no time in attending to the unconscious clone. She held her hands out over the clone, and flinched. "Bring Master Yoda," she said to Obi-wan. "I have never encountered something like this before."

Yoda came as quickly as he could in his hovering chair, Mace Windu at his side. Obi-wan had called in Shaak Ti too, who was no inexperienced healer herself. Padme stood off to the side, looking out of place and confused.

"Powerful dark energy, I sense," Yoda said, gim. "But primitive. Brutal."

"It's like something tore its way into his mind," said Shaak Ti. Her eyes were closed, and she held her hands over the clone's head. "Everything's in there, it's just... wrecked."

"Is this the work of the Sith?" asked Master Che. "I've healed Jedi who had been altered by them, but that was subtle work, and needed a subtle cure. This is anything but subtle."

"I think you'd better tell us what you know, Senator," said Mace Windu.

"Everything I'm going to tell you, I heard from Esera Komara, the so-called Dark Jedi. According to her, this clone was on Emberlene a few weeks ago, on a mission that came from Janus Greejatus." Every Council member in the room gave a start. His name was known to them. They knew he was somehow linked to Darth Sidious, and now to Chancellor Tarkin too. That he should come into this was *very* interesting. *Komara delivers,* thought Obi-wan, feeling glum. "The clone were tasked with retrieving a Sith artifact from the planet. What they didn't know was that Emberlene has its own Force-using tradition, descended from the Sith. One of the local 'wise women,' as Komara called them, did this to the clone. That's how Komara knew what the clone was up to. She said the woman's eyes turned yellow as she used the dark side."

Obi-wan and Yoda exchanged a glance. *Just like Darth Maul,* he thought.

"Truth, Komara spoke, I believe," said Yoda. "Disturbing news, you have brought us."

"There's something else, master," Padme said, as she frowned. "Again, this came from Komara, I don't know how much we should believe it, if at all. Maybe it's some kind of Separatist disinformation tactic, I don't know. But..." She took a deep breath, and looked Yoda in the eyes. "According to Komara, this clone told her that they have been ready to take down the Jedi 'since day one.'"

"She's got every reason to lie about that," Mace Windu said. "Sowing distrust between the Jedi and the clone army would be a great victory for the Separatists."

"She's not a liar," Obi-wan said. He stared intently at the clone, stroking his beard, and shook his head. "No, Komara's not a liar."

"It's all coming together, now," said Shaak Ti, her voice faint. Yoda gave her a look, but turned towards Padme.

"Contemplate this, we will, Senator," he said. "Your part, you have done. Now ours, we must do. Master Che, Master Ti, with me you will join. Try to heal this clone's mind, we will."

"We'll see the Senator out," said Windu. He put his hand on Obi-wan's shoulder. *Dismissed,* Obi-wan thought. *Maul on the loose, the Order crumbling, Sidious's henchmen searching for Sith relics, and now the clones might be turning on us. Interesting times indeed!*

It only took a few days for Esera to learn to appreciate the rain of Zoma V. The rain gave her something else to focus on besides the heat, a temperature which made Zeltros and Emberlene look temperate. *How can a planet with so many clouds be so hot?* Esera wondered, sweating from every pore. She'd had to strip down to just her uniform's undershirt and skirt, and if that wasn't damp from the sweat, it was damp from the rain. Being surrounded by the living Force after a long flight was always something pleasant, but she'd grown used to it again, and now the heat was unbearable. She'd had a headache for days and sometimes felt nauseous, and her right hand was acting up more than usual. That was how she found herself sitting on the porch of Lord Lakau's hall, watching boats come and go, not really feeling like doing anything else. Inside, outside, it didn't matter, either way it felt as steamy and moist as the girls' shower room at the Temple after lightsaber practice. Not a time she was eager to revisit, in mind or place.

The others were all busy. The engineers were overseeing the construction of the base, as the shuttle went back and forth between the surface and *Encounter*, bringing down supplies for the droids to use. Alize was thriving in the tropical climate, working with Sanya to bring more variety to the ship's hydroponics bay and learn how the Felinians prepared their food. Murshida had wandered around with them for a few days, but had gone back to the ship, having had his fill of mud in his armored pressure suit's joints. Voyan seemed more than happy enough to leave the construction to his subordinates. He'd been spending all his time with Shau Meo whenever he and Purity weren't discussing guns with Lakau. Shau Meo and Voyan spoke quietly, and with energy. *Of course,* Esera thought. *He's off chasing cat tail.* As usual, Esera was left on her own. She'd done her part, she'd negotiated the broad strokes of the deal, she was too tired to do anything else. The heat sapped all her energy.

At least the Felinians are interested in what we're doing, thought Esera. After the day's work, as twilight came over the village above the swamp, she watched Zule Xiss excitedly explain the principles of fusion power to the natives, with a few corrections from Lieutenant-Commander Durm.

"Look at her go," Voyan said to Esera, pausing as he headed into Lakau's hall. "That smile could light up a room."

"I guess," said Esera.

"Still don't like her?"

"It's not your business."

"You really don't play well with others, Captain."

"I don't *play* with anyone, Commander. Unlike some."

The engineer's eyes narrowed. "Why do I feel you're angry at me?"

"This is a mission, Commander, not recreation."

Voyan was truly perplexed, and went off. To talk with Shau Meo, probably. *The last thing I need is one of my subordinates getting involved with the chieftain's daughter...*

The next interruption came from Purity, who squatted down next to her, perfectly balanced on her heels. "Captain Esera Komara, look what I found," she said, holding out her hands. In them writhed a gigantic slug the size of lightsaber's handle, its wet skin a mottled yellow.

"Gah!" squeaked Esera, scrambling backwards. "Get that away from me!"

"It is a slug, Captain," said Purity, giving her an innocent tilt of her head. "It is harmless. I have never seen a slug so big in the five days we have been on this planet."

"I don't care about slugs, Purity! I don't want to see one!"

Purity had the gall to look hurt. "Has the slug offended you, Captain?"

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"Because it's gross, and slimy, and disgusting! Get it out of here!"

"I will remove the slug, Captain." Purity sprang up to her feet, slug in her slime-covered hands. She jumped down into a boat, surprisingly a Felinian greatly, and Esera caught a snippet of incredibly confused conversation about slugs.

My life is the worst comedy in the Galaxy, thought Esera, clamping a hand over her eyes. Her head ached with a distant pounding, and when she stood up, she felt dizzy. Esera stumbled into Lakau's hall, shielding her eyes with her twitching right hand, searching for another place to sit. Of course, the first thing she saw was Voyan and Shau, giving her curious looks, the two people she didn't want to see right now. No doubt they'd heard her outburst. "What are you looking at?" she asked them.

"You really don't look well, Captain," said Voyan, as Shau's ears laid flat. The Felinian shrank away, huddled against the engineer.

"I'm fine," she said, feeling the anger course through her blood like fire. A different kind of fire, at least, from what was already burning inside her. "Leave me alone."

"Captain, *you* came inside-" Voyan started to say, but Lakau stirred from where he was looking over weapons diagrams.

"Lady Komara, are you ill?" he asked.

"I'm not ill," Esera mumbled. "Just tired."

"I should hope not, we've given you the best of food and care," said Lakau. "But if something is bothering you, let us know. The clan of Meo has never been said to be stingy."

"I'm going to sleep," Esera said, regardless of how far off from sunset it was. *It's like there's a damn drill behind my eyes,* she thought, clutching the side of her head. She grit her teeth to stop from groaning. Her hair was wet, not from the rain, but sweat. She was soaked in sweat. *No point in getting the cloak, if I'm already this wet.* Esera caught the next boat coming by through the village waterways and went back to her hut.

Night brought no relief. It never cooled off on Zoma V, thanks to the near-constant clouds trapping atmospheric heat. Esera could not sleep, the pain behind her eyes was so bad. She took some painkillers from the transport shuttle medkit, but they hardly did anything to help. In fact, Esera thought they made her feel even worse. *Should I just go back up to the ship? No, I need to stay here. Lakau wouldn't respect a woman who runs away because of a headache. Besides, I told him I was fine. I can get through this!* She hid in the air-conditioned shuttle until it had to leave, then it was back into the sweltering humidity of the swampy rainforest.

Esera's day got even worse when the clouds parted, revealing the horrid blazing sun above. She stayed in her hut, laying in a puddle of her own sweat, mouth dry, head pounding. Even her sensitivity to the Force was dulling. She tried to stand, but she became so nauseous she would have vomited, if there'd been anything in her stomach to heave up.

This is hell, she thought, sprawled out on the hut floor, vision blurred, *I should have gone back to the ship, damn what Lakau thinks! I'm not even needed down here! Is this how I'm going to die? Because I was too stupid to go back to space? Esera Komara, dead at eighteen, too dumb to realize she really would melt in temperatures above fifteen degrees.*

Somewhere, Esera heard voices. Female voices, then a male voice. One male voice in particular. Then she was off the floor, being bumped and jostled this way and that. What was going on? Every time she tried to focus, her brain hurt. The Force whirled around her in a frenzy. *You can't die here,* Esera told herself. She thought she told herself. *How silly would that be? Melted by a jungle planet after surviving Grievous and Aspar and Marko Riberre and the coup and Emberlener witches and the black hole? No, it's not over yet...*

The murderous heat was suddenly gone, and all things faded into darkness.

Somewhere, thunder boomed, echoing off the towers of Coruscant. The foreboding dark clouds above lent a great gravity to the setting Obi-wan found himself in, out in the normally tranquil Temple gardens. Shaak Ti was with him.

"Alpha-82 has somewhat recovered," she said. "He's awake, aware, he knows who he is and where he is. He's not quite sure *when* he is. His short-term memory was completely wrecked."

"*Was* wrecked, or *is* wrecked?" asked Obi-wan.

"*Was*, thankfully. Anything from the past year or so is a jumbled mess in his mind. Everything from here on out will be clear for him."

"So, he's going back to active duty?"

"Once the army psychologists deem him fit," said Shaak Ti. She stared out over the garden, and Obi-wan felt her unhappiness.

"You don't think he should have gone back?"

"I would have liked to find out more about him," she said. "I want to know why he said the clones were ready to destroy the Jedi."

"To be honest, I was hoping to find out more about that too," Obi-wan agreed. "Master Windu thinks Komara was lying."

"Master Windu is..." The Togruta sighed, and lowered her head. "Master Windu is doing the best he can with what he has. And between the word of a traitor and the word of a loyal soldier, he's believing the soldier."

"But Komara's never lied to us before."

"No, not according to you. And I do believe you, that you believe her," said Shaak Ti.

"The other day, you said *it's all coming together.* What did you mean by that?"

Shaak Ti balled her fists. "Anyone should be able to see it. I'm ashamed I didn't sooner. Look at what's happening, Obi-wan. One in eight Jedi have defected to the Chancellor's private army. The remaining field commanders have spies assigned to tail them everywhere. And now a clone has admitted they're ready to turn on us. It's so *obvious!*"

"You think Tarkin's going to turn the clone army on us?" The very thought made Obi-wan's stomach twist, it was so wrong. And yet... the pieces fit. And that struck a chord of fear deep in his heart.

"Not Tarkin. Sidious."

Another roll of thunder came in from afar. *Fitting,* Obi-wan thought, glancing out in its direction.

"Think, Obi-wan!" Shaak Ti went on. "You told us yourself Jango Fett was hired to be the clone army's template by a man named Tyranus. You told us yourself that Tyranus was an alias for Dooku. Why would Sidious's apprentice assist in making the clone army he would fight against ten years later? Because Sidious was someone who could pull strings at the highest level of the Republic's government. If he could somehow turn the clone army on the Jedi, who were scattered across the Galaxy, their every move watched, with a secularized splinter order already loyal to the Republic, waiting to replace them-"

"Hold on, hold on," Obi-wan said, holding his hands up. "You can't be suggesting Aspar's betrayal was *planned* from the start."

"At this point, I don't know what's a Sith plot and what's just random chance." Shaak Ti sighed, and her shoulders slumped. "Maybe Aspar was just an opportunity. But the clones, Tyranus; it's all linked back to Sidious. We're sitting there, in his sights. He could pull the trigger at any moment. Tarkin must be in contact with him, if he's got Greejatus chasing Sith artifacts."

That was another angle that concerned Obi-wan, far less chilling than Shaak Ti's wild but plausible idea that the clone army was part of an insanely huge plot to destroy the Jedi. "What could Tarkin possibly want with Sith artifacts?" he wondered.

"What could *Darth Sidious,* dark lord of the Sith, want with Sith artifacts?" Shaak Ti asked in turn. "Does it matter? Whatever it is, it must be bad for us."

"Fair enough... Shaak Ti, we should take this to the Council. If we're in the danger you think we're in, we need to tell them."

She smiled, but it was sad and tired. "You think they'd believe me when I can't even convince you?"

"It's a long reach, Shaak Ti," said Obi-wan. "As much as I trust Komara not to lie to us, maybe the clone was bluffing. They were in the middle of a fight, after all. Maybe we're reacting to a mere boast."

The Togruta didn't meet his eyes. She looked up to the dark storm clouds. "Isn't it pretty to think so?"

Half the Felinian village had crowded into Lakau Meo's hall, along with all of *Encounter*'s crew. Commander Miha Voyan was the center of attention, the huge chieftain looming above him. Sanya stood with Zule and Alize close to them.

"It's called heat stroke," said Voyan. "Lady Komara's people live on a cold planet. A very cold planet. None of you have ever seen snow or ice, so trust me when I say you'd all die within hours of sunset there. Lady Komara's race, the Stalimurians, are much better suited to that cold than they are to a warm place like your home. And unfortunately, Lady Komara has a stubborn streak a kilometer- a mile wide." The Felinians weren't used to the idea of kilometers. "Her mission was to build this base and help the Felinians. She wanted to see it through to the end. We'd noticed she'd been acting odd for a few days, but we were all caught up in the excitement of our own tasks. We failed to notice the heat exhaustion building in her, and... well, you know the rest. We found her collapsed and delirious in the first stages of heat stroke this morning."

"And that means...?" Lakau prompted, his voice a rumble in the silent hall.

"Sweating drains the body of vital salts, excessive loss of which leads to organ failure-" Voyan stopped, considering just how uneducated his audience was. "Look, she was really sick, we sent her back to our starship for treatment. She'll live."

"I am heartened to hear that," said Lakau. "To have a foreign envoy die under our care would be a shame that would ruin the Meo clan. I offered her any help she wanted and she refused anything, yes, but the blame is still mine. No guest should ever suffer under my roof." Some of the village elders nodded along, muttering in agreement. "Alright, everyone back to work, we have a job to finish!"

The Felinians spilled out, back to their boats, Durm and Zule going with them. "She *will* be fine, right?" Sanya asked Voyan.

"...Probably," Voyan said in a low voice. Lakau and his children all twitched their ears, even from across the hall. They'd heard anyway. "Back in the Trade Federation days, I heard heat casualties in the ground forces were permanently put on second-line duty. Once they'd succumbed to heat, they'd be vulnerable to it for the rest of their lives. Part of the reason the Federation was going all in on droid armies. Droids don't care how hot it gets."

"I hope she's okay..." sighed Alize. "I should have gone back up with her. She needs someone more caring than Purity with her."

"She's got Buna," said Sanya. Voyan and Alize both looked at her. "What? Buna can be really considerate! And Mister Murshida's up there too. And Klaud. And R8."

"Klaud can't even speak Basic," Alize muttered.

"R8 will definitely take care of her," said Voyan. But Sanya could feel it in the Force, that was how strong Voyan's concern was.

Days turned to weeks, and construction of the base drew near to a close. Voyan taught Shau everything he could, right on through calculus and classical physics. The Felinian was with him every step of the way, when they hit a stumbling block. For Voyan. The two of them were staring at datapad full of equations Sanya couldn't make heads nor tails of, when Voyan made his confession.

"I took one class on introductory hyperspace physics," he said. "I barely passed it. I don't know how much of this I can teach you, Shau. Anything based on our-reality physics, I can handle. Hyperspace physics... We'll see."

Shau's ears tilted back. "That's alright," he said, in a quiet voice. "I think... I think I see what's going on here. I mean, some of these variables, I have no idea what they are. But if I did, I could figure out how they worked together. Let's start there!"

"Here we go," said Voyan, taking a deep breath. Sanya had stopped understanding what they were talking about back during trigonometry. Now they might as well have been speaking Huttese.

During the final week of construction, Voyan left oversight entirely to Durm and Zule, as he and Shau attacked hyperspace physics with their combined intellect. That intellect was mostly Shau's, as Voyan exhausted the last of his knowledge. "So, *this* ties back into that relativity stuff we talked about the other week," Shau told Voyan, excitedly moving letters around on the datapad screen. "I don't know *why* it works like this, but *this* part completely cancels our relativity part of the equation."

"The relativistic shielding," said Voyan. "It's not just to put off the time dilation of near-lightspeed velocities, but it also shifts you into a unified frame of reference."

Shau tilted his head. "Explain," he said.

"It's..." The Human tapped away at the datapad, until a graph appeared. "Okay, how do I explain this? This axis is time, this axis is space. For us. Let's say we're sitting still and just watching things, we're only moving on the time axis. Now, imagine somewhere far away, Sanya and Zule are also sitting in space, only moving in the time axis. We're moving parallel to each other, though we're far apart. You and I shine a hyperspace flashlight at Sanya and Zule. It travels faster than light and gets there quite quickly, for a beam of light."

Sanya and Zule exchanged a confounded glance. *Who even knows what the boys are talking about anymore,* she thought. No one taught this kind of science at the Temple, that's what correspondence courses with local universities were for. Voyan drew a line from one point on the graph to the other, straight across.

"Alright, this makes sense," Shau said. "So where's the problem?"

"Let's say Captain Komara is flying her ship between our two parties. At some point, our beam of hyperspace-light crosses her path. She sees the event happening where we are, and the effect happening where Sanya and Zule are. But because Captain Komara is moving away from us and towards the girls, she's not parallel to our time axis." Voyan put a new graph over the old one on the datapad, and then he tilted it to match the hypothetical course of *Encounter.* "Do you see the problem here, Shau?"

The Felinian boy's ears perked straight up, his eyes widened. "It's backwards!" he exclaimed.

"Huh," said Sanya.

"Whoa," said Zule.

"From Captain Komara's point of view, she sees the hyperspace-light beam arrive where Sanya and Zule are *before* we send it to them!" Shau exclaimed, leaping up from his seat. "That's why the unified frame of reference has to exist! Otherwise the hyperdrive is a time machine! Captain Komara could do something like... send us a hyperspace message telling us not to send the flashlight beam to Sanya and Zule! Causality is gone, it's out the window!"

"This is the first thing I've understood something from your conversations this week," Zule said.

"I'm still confused," Sanya said. "So... time is relative, depending on where you are in space?"

"That's why it's called relativity," said Voyan. "And despite our universe working on that principle, the hyperdrive ignores it without violating causality. *That* is the really interesting thing."

"So, how does it do that?" asked Shau.

Voyan crossed his arms, and leaned back in his chair. "The hyperdrive is a reality-breaking device invented by a long-dead species who did whatever they wanted with reality," he said. "How does the hyperdrive force itself into a unified frame of reference for all observers involved? How do black dwarf stars exist when the universe is so young? Rakatans, Shau. That's all I can say. They did *weird* things with the universe. Everything I have to teach you from here on out gets *weird*. Hyperspace physics is *weird*. The hyperdrive existing at all is *weird*. It took me years to get to the point where I somewhat understood the basic principles the hyperdrive violates in order to work. You've managed it in a few days. You've got a gift."

"You really think I do?" Shau blushed, laying his ears back.

"Hell yeah you do," said Sanya. "You almost bled Miha Voyan dry on what he could teach you about math and physics in what, three and a half weeks? You're brilliant!"

"You could do a lot out there, kid," Zule said, nodding in the upward direction. *Kid, she says,* thought Sanya. *Shau's a year older than us!*

"I've met outback hyperspace navigators with a quarter of your talent, Shau," Voyan said. "I want you for our crew. Someone like you could do us a lot of good when we take the fight to the Hutts."

There it is, it's on the table. Sanya smiled at the prospect. *Imagine,* Encounter*, with a cute boy our age...* In hindsight, she was glad Voyan had rejected her advances immediately. If she turned her attention to Shau, he might have ended up feeling hurt. Sanya hated to speak ill of people she liked, but in a contest between Shau Meo and Miha Voyan, Shau won every category except in height. And being a very small woman, male height wasn't something Sanya placed great value on.

"Mister Voyan..." Shau said, as his tail quivered with energy. "I... I want to go to space! I'll do it! But I need to ask my father..."

"Shouldn't be too hard, right?" Sanya asked. "Your father's a warrior. You wish you could be too, right?"

"Well, sometimes," said Shau. He looked away, unjustly ashamed.

"You don't need huge muscles to work in space, Shau," Sanya went on. "I'm not a warmonger, I'm not even much for fighting. But we've got the Hutts in our sights, and that's a juster cause than most to fight for. Help our ship, become a part of our crew, strike back against these slavers in a way only you can! Come with us, bring glory to the clan of Meo!"

Shau beamed now, and stood up, his excitement renewed. "Alright! I'll say that! Thank you, Sanya!"

"Heat stroke, huh?" asked Buna, sitting by Esera's bed in the medbay like a dark mountain of muscle and scales. Blessedly cold air gently flowed by, the only warmth Esera felt was her own body heating up the sheet beneath her.

"Indeed," Purity Alpha said. She read off a datapad: "Heat stroke is an advanced stage of heat exhaustion, when the internal temperature of a Human body reaches-"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever." Buna brushed the datapad away. "Point is, Captain Jedi shoulda stayed up here with us, where it's nice and cool! What were you thinkin', down there? Ain't no way you didn't know somethin' was wrong! Us folks from cold planets gotta stick to our own climates, you know!"

"What can I say? I'm not that smart," Esera muttered. Being awake without a red-hot pneumatic hammer pounding behind her eyes was another kind of novelty she was savoring. In time, the sensation would fate, but for now, it was heavenly.

"Captain Komara was quite irritable while on the surface," said Purity. "Moreso than usual, I was informed."

"By who?" asked Esera.

"Commander Voyan said, and I quote," Purity dropped her voice an octave and did a chillingly perfect recreation of Voyan's melange accent: "*'She's even moodier lately, this is worse than what happened after Sanya came aboard.'*"

"I wasn't there for that..." said Buna, leaning in closer, no doubt sensing a story.

"That's private business between Sanya and I. And now I will have private business with Voyan, when he gets back," Esera said. "When do I get out of here?"

"The medical droid requests you stay in place for another forty-eight hours so your recovery can be monitored," Purity told her.

So, Esera spent two days in the medbay, catching up on intelligence reports she'd read on Zoma but had no clear memory of, and ignoring messages from Voyan. *Betrayed by the Jedi, betrayed by the Republic, betrayed by Sanya, betrayed by my own body,* she thought. What had it looked like, to the Felinians, when she was carted off into the shuttle and sent back to her starship? Some weak little girl fainting because she was overheated? *Ridiculous!* Grievous, of course, would never learn about this.

Work went on, on the planet's surface, and Esera found herself with an unusual amount of free time. One afternoon of doing nothing proved just as unbearable as her idle time aboard *Invisible Hand,* though, as memories of bad times floated to the surface of her mind, and silence forced her to confront things within herself she did not want to acknowledge. *Time for a challenge,* she decided.

Esera showed up early for lightsaber practice with Murshida. Purity came too, to watch from the hangar's raised walkway. This wasn't unusual, Esera was used to an audience. But today she wore the same outfit and shoes she'd worn when she dueled General Taclai on Emberlene.

"Captain, this is an... unexpected appearance," Murshida said, visibly confused.

"You never know when you'll need to fight," Esera announced. "If I can fight in a dress and high heels, then I know I'm ready for anything. Purity, get down here."

The biodroid gracefully slid down the staircase railing, making a perfect landing at the bottom that transformed into an elegant bow. "Purity Alpha, at your service, Captain."

"This is a secret between us three, got that?" The other two nodded. "I'm borrowing Zule's lightsaber. I am going to teach you, Purity, while I learn to fight in less than helpful clothing."

"I feel obsolete, Captain," Murshida said, leaning on his vibro-weapon.

"You're *too* challenging, Murshida, at least until I get a feel for this. You're the referee, just like when Zule and I practice, okay? And you get to help Purity learn."

"For a woman who opposes violence as a means to an end, you have no trouble bringing others into it," said Murshida. "I hope you're not losing your faith in your ways, Captain."

"The lightsaber is my final solution to a problem, Mister Murshida. But it is still *a* solution," said Esera. *I really am starting to think like Grievous... But when we're up against the likes of Tarkin, or Aredian, or the Hutts, what choice do we have? Some people cannot be reasoned with.*

Lightsaber dueling in high heels was an interesting experience. Esera had to learn a new sense of balance, and certain ways of moving were not an option unless she wanted to snap the heels off. In a real situation, that was viable, but not in practice Esera quite liked her shoes unbroken. In some ways, a dress was much easier to move in, in other ways, much more annoying to deal with. Fighting in pants was definitely the better option, they didn't catch on anything, or get stepped on, but... *That swirl the skirts do when I turn* does *look flashy,* Esera thought, with a little smile.

Purity Alpha was an attentive student, and after two weeks, a formidable foe. She was a droid, Esera could not read her mind or intentions, only her very limited precognition gave her an edge, and that only lasted as long as her focus and connection to the Force did. And, as a droid, Purity did not get tired. She was in peak condition from start to finish of their training matches, unlike Esera, whose stamina was finite. What made Purity more dangerous than Zule, though, was her lack of anger and fear. Zule had a complex towards her lightsaber, Esera had noticed. It was a tool through which she expressed power, but also a tool that had failed her repeatedly, with life-altering consequences. The lightsaber was linked intimately with her aggression and her fear.

Khan's daughter had none of that. She wasn't the stone-cold fighter Esera expected, no; Purity *enjoyed* their matches. She grinned, and even laughed, win or lose. The biodroid threw herself with enthusiasm into learning the ways of the lightsaber. She did not get frustrated, she did not get discouraged; Purity's response to failure was to simply ask: "How can I do better?"

Esera wondered what the rest of the crew thought of Purity. Maybe to them, Purity was a harmless child-like being, who held slugs in her hands and showed them to others. *She's anything but harmless. Khan built this machine to learn. Slugs or lightsabers, Purity wants to learn. She wants to succeed. She wants to excel.* The scary thing was, she *could*. After the third week, when Esera was doing the later half of the training sessions in her usual training clothes, she was struggling to beat Purity. The biodroid had very quickly grasped the basics of Form Two lightsaber combat, as taught to Esera by Grievous, at least.

Neither of them lasted long against Murshida, though. The old Skakoan wasn't afraid to play rough, once he simply picked Purity up by the collar of her shirt and threw her against the hangar wall. "Dead!" he said. "If I'd really thrown you, your brain would have been shaken to jelly by that impact."

"I see, Mister Murshida," said Purity, who'd landed on her feet after hitting the wall. "But I do not have an organic brain. I am not shaken in the slightest."

"Is that so?" Murshida asked, leveling his wrist-mounted blaster at her. "Dead. There, I shot you while you were flying through the air."

Purity looked troubled, and was silent for a moment. "I am dead," she concluded. "I cannot make evasive actions while in the air."

"Don't let him get in his arms' reach, next time," said Esera. "The same goes for Grievous, if you ever go up against him. But Grievous will use his hand *and* feet to grab you."

The biodroid gave her a curious look. "Are you planning to challenge Grievous, Captain Komara?"

"What? No!" Esera shuddered at the very idea. She pointed at the two magnaguards, standing silently to the side. "But those guys are his, and they're sending back what they see to him. Grievous knows you exist and is watching your progress." *Even if he hasn't mentioned you to me when we talk*, she didn't add.

"Esera Komara has taught me many things," Purity said, looking straight at the droids. "I would very much like to meet her teacher."

Esera's holocommunicator began to beep. "Look what you did!" she hissed at Purity, rushing to answer it. Out sprang the life-sized blue-tinted image of the monstrous cyborg.

"Ask, and you shall receive," Grievous's rough voice boomed through the hangar, before transforming into a cackle. He loomed over Esera and Purity, intimidating even in hologram form. "Komara is right, I *have* been keeping an eye on these sessions. Khan is an interesting droid. You, Alpha, are an interesting droid too. I see great use for you."

"Thank you, General," said Purity, bowing. "Your pupil has taught me well."

"Has she?" Grievous's eyes crinkled with suppressed laughter. "Well, you can't be worse than that useless Zeltron girl. Such wasted effort on the part of the Jabiimis. I thought about returning her to them, but my *pupil* has sympathy for her." He didn't bother controlling his laugh this time. Esera blushed, but held her tongue, not wanting to give Grievous a reason to keep going down that path of conversation.

"Ensign Zule Xiss is a dedicated engineer, she is very helpful to the ship and not useless at all," Purity said.

"Don't talk back to him, Purity," Esera said. "Only I can do that."

"It's true," said Grievous. "But I make sure she's punished for it afterwards. Komara is too valuable to be killed outright for impudence."

"Thanks," Esera muttered.

Grievous would have smirked if he had a mouth, Esera knew that of him well. "There is potential in you, Alpha. And I've seen the Skakoan fight firsthand. Komara, keep them close on your missions. You end up in trouble too often to be going into risky situations alone. Use my magnaguards, that's why I loaned them to you. Use the Skakoan warrior. And if he's too conspicuous or intimidating for your surroundings, then use Alpha. Listen to them if they think you are in danger. You have come a long way since our first meeting, but it only takes one mistake for you to die. No more solo missions."

Does he know about the heat stroke? wondered Esera. Eager to keep the subject off her, she spoke: "Grievous, I'm not sure Purity is ready for actual combat yet. She's made a lot of progress in a very short time, but-"

"Nonsense." Grievous did his dismissive hand wave. "Alpha is the creation of Khan. I have no doubt she's programmed to kill."

Purity's good nature vanished at those words. "I am *not* programmed," she said, giving Grievous the same unblinking stare she'd given Buna weeks ago, eyes filled with a restrained kind of anger, like a monster lurking beneath still water. Esera thought it was eerie, how something artificial could look so *alive*.

Grievous snorted. "Khan will be pleased to know his droid is working perfectly. Komara, how goes your work at Zoma?"

"The base should be finished... probably today, at the rate they're going. The first weapons shipment from Siskeen will arrive in the morning. For me, at least."

"Good. Finish your training, I will call again soon. Something's come up and you're the best woman I have for the job, I want you to meet who you will be working with."

"Um, alright," said Esera. The transmission shut off, without further formalities. *He can't know about the heat stroke then, if he still thinks I'm good at this stuff...* Purity was still staring at the space where Grievous had been. It made Esera's skin crawl.

Very far away from Zoma V, Grievous was descending to Ciutric IV, seat of the Ciutric Hegemony, a regional power in the Galactic North of the Outer Rim. Out of the twenty five worlds of the Hegemony, Ciutric held an entire third of the polity's population, eleven billion out of thirty one billion. It was an established world, a bastion of civilization on the frontier of the Galaxy, and had weathered thousands of years of conflict, successive waves of barbarian invasions from Wild Space slamming against its metaphorical ramparts, making safe everything Coreward of it.

Grievous had studied the Ciutricenes before. Wealthy they might have been, but not soft. They were a shrewd and practical people, a disciplined culture enforced by the constant wars the Hegemony was forced to fight. Not in a thousand years had there been a generation of Ciutricenes who did not have to go to war. It was etched into the soul of their being. He respected them, as a warrior to other warriors. And he could appreciate the clever strategies they'd developed to deal with their unruly neighbors.

One such strategy was turning their enemies into allies. Several groups of invaders had been defeated by the Hegemony, only to be settled on their outer worlds, garrisons on the frontier of the frontier, holding their new lands in fealty to Ciutric in return for their service in war. One such group was a Mandalorian tribe, exiled from their homeworld after the civil war that had devastated the planet. Clan Tenau was a sad remnant of what it had been generations ago, but a large part of it had tired of wandering, attempted to take a wealthy planet, got thrashed by the battle-hardened Ciutricene military, and resettled as a frontier garrison. The Mandalorians of Tenau lived simple lives as farmers and craftsmen, raising their families and teaching their culture, while they weren't donning their armor to go out and battle against their patrons' enemies.

The shuttle touched down in the city of Daplona, the sparkling-clean, gleaming white capital of the Hegemony. It was spring on this planet, or something close to it, the sky was a vivid blue and two moons hung faintly, peeking out behind scattered clouds like grey shadows. A division-strong honor guard received Grievous, blue and white Confederate banners flew alongside the yellow and red of the Hegemony. A small part of Grievous wanted to scold the Ciutricenes for wasting a whole division just to make his arrival look grand, but a few thousand troops were nothing compared to the hundred million soldiers being trained across the Hegemony right now.

They do look impressive enough, though, Grievous thought, walking down the ramp of the shuttle. *As is suitable for a state visit such as this.* The recently-liberated Hegemony worlds were being brought back into the Confederate fold. Grievous's presence was a message to any observing, the Separatists were here to stay. With him he brought blueprints, machine tools, and computer software. The Hegemony's industry would be prepared for the next existential battle against the Republic.

The statesmen and stateswomen of Ciutric were all required to serve in the military or civil service for life. Many had done time in both. Grievous found them not unpleasant to deal with. Even flatterers and sycophants would exist in such a structure, but there were blessedly few at this high level of state. *Hopefully most were killed off in the Republic's occupation,* he thought.

Assuring the Ciutricenes they would not suffer another occupation was the primary mission for Grievous. But he was much more interested in the secondary mission. He sought to talk with the chieftain of Clan Tenau. The Minister of Allied Peoples was quick to oblige, and they brought the man in within two days.

"These *are* Mandalorians, General," the Minister of Allied Peoples said, a harsh-looking Human who'd clearly done more than a little time on the front lines. The *whir-click* of a cybernetic leg concealed beneath his clothes was evidence enough. "By law I am required to observe all contacts between their leadership and foreign governments."

"Do what you must, minister," Grievous told him, trying not to roll his eyes. On paper, the Hegemony was an independent state, just like every other constituting the Confederacy of Independent Systems. In reality, Grievous could have told these people to stand on their heads whenever he passed by and they would have had to do it or face his wrath. *They're lucky I have no mood for games.*

The Tenau Mandalorians were big Humans, in height and frame. Their chieftain was brown of skin, of hair, and of eye, he would have stood even with Komara's Skakoan warrior. Many of his associates looked similar. One Human, though, was pale-skinned with golden hair, and one wasn't a Human at all, but instead something merely close. She was so close to being translucent that she made the pale Human look dark, and her eyes were completely black. *Ocsin,* Grievous's connection to the droid network told him. *Near-Human species from Farana, a planet in Wild Space. How did he get here?*

The Tenau chieftain gave him a nod. He did not bow or kneel, nor even extend a hand, he and all his party just stood, respectful but on guard. Grievous had to stand straighter to maintain his looming presence. They were intimidated by him, not as much as some, but something primal still stirred in their hearts, the fear of the unknown predator Grievous summoned up from deep inside their psyches. But they controlled it well. Disciplined, just like the Ciutricenes, if not even more so. *As expected of the Mandalorians.*

"I'd offer you all seats," the Minister of Allied Peoples said, "but I doubt either of you would use them." He sat behind a desk, folded his hands, and leaned back. "I'm merely an observer. Say what you will."

"General," said the chieftain, "I'm Jerahmeel of the Tenau. This is my daughter, Rahab," he gestured to another tall, robust, and dark woman, "my brother Baruch," the blonde, pale Human, "and Kasi, our historian." That was the alien among them. The others didn't get introductions, so Grievous supposed they were the chieftain's retinue. All wore armor, bronze plates with yellow and red bands on their arms. Allegiance to Ciutric. "You've summoned us at an interesting time, General."

"Interesting indeed," Grievous said. "You know why you're here, then."

"There's unrest on the homeworld," Jerahmeel said. "The usurper falters."

Usurper? The Kryze Clan? Grievous didn't know much about the Mandalorians, that's why he was here. "So there is. Bo-Katan Kryze grows ever more reliant on the Republic. And they seek to keep it so. They want your homeworld's treasure."

"Everyone wants the beskar," said Jerahmeel. "Even the Tenau, way out here on the edge of everything."

"I am here to offer you a chance to reclaim that treasure," Grievous said.

Jerahmeel looked at the Ciutricene minister, who merely opened a hand, palm up. The Mandalorian turned back to Grievous. "My allegiance is to Ciutric, General. I swore an oath of honor on behalf of my clan. I cannot break that. However... if there are men and women among the Tenau willing to enter service as mercenaries, that is within their right."

His daughter, Rahab, stepped forward. "Let me go," she said. "I'm old enough now!"

"Old enough, yes," said Jerahmeel. "You're a proven warrior, Rahab. But do you know how to lead warriors? Do you know what the right choices are, and the wrong ones? Do you know the burdens you must carry?"

Rahab's temperature flared on Grievous's heads-up display. She was blushing, though she was dark enough it was hard to tell. The young woman looked down. "I- no... I don't know," she said.

"Good answer," said Jerahmeel. He put his hand on her shoulder. "Right answer. And that's why I'll give you this chance to learn. Take your uncle Baruch with you, and a company of our warriors. Serve the General."

"Thank you, dad! I won't fail you!" The young woman grinned, almost bouncing with excitement, while Baruch offered only the faintest knowing smile.

For a moment, Grievous was struck by the familiarity of what he was seeing. *I know this scene,* he thought, his mind flying back to the jungles and savannas of Kalee. *I have stood in both those shoes before.* The youth, eager to prove she could lead a warband. The elder, looking for the next generation of commanders among the unseasoned warriors.

"General, I will draw a contract up immediately," Rahab said, standing at attention. "My warriors will be at your service."

"Very good," said Grievous. "But it is not me you will be working for."

"General..?" Jerahmeel asked, raising an eyebrow. Grievous laid down a holoprojector, and a blue transparent Komara appeared next to him.

"Grievous, I-" Komara looked around, realizing she wasn't alone. "Ah, Mandalorians. This must be my next mission," she said. Perhaps Grievous should have told her who she'd be meeting. Komara was wearing one of those ridiculous long dresses, the kind of clothing Humans wore because they thought it made them look important. *Not the best appearance to put on towards Mandalorians, Komara.* He would have to assure them she was up for this task.

"Who is this... girl, General?" asked Jerahmeel.

"*I* am Esera Komara," said the former Jedi, putting her hands on her hips. "I hold the rank of Captain in the Confederate Navy and am a peer of Raxus Secundus. You will speak to me directly and address me as Lady Komara or Captain Komara. Who are *you?*"

Grievous couldn't help but feel like grinning. This little Human had come so far in the past eight or so months. She was so full of fire, now. Angry Komara was by far the best Komara, light years ahead of gloomy Komara and impudent Komara.

"I am Jerahmeel of the Tenau."

"And I am Rahab of the Tenau." Rahab stood with crossed arms, giving Komara a skeptical look. "Supposedly, I'm going to be working for you. I'll have a contract of service for you to sign. Lady Komara."

"Great, more paperwork," said Komara. "What exactly am I going to be doing, Grievous?"

"You'll be causing the Republic a little trouble on Mandalore. Meet Rahab Tenau and her company at Agamar in three days," Grievous said.

At long last, the new base at Zoma V was complete. Sanya looked up at the platform mounted on a dozen sturdy pillars. There was a structure beneath the platform, a building almost hanging in suspension. It was bare-bones as it came, with only the most essential utilities beyond ship maintenance and provisioning. As Voyan said it, this base would be a safe haven for Separatist privateers who would shortly begin operations against the Hutts. Shielded by the planet's heat, weather, and ground clutter, finding the base on long-range scanners would not be easy. That it was off the beaten road of hyperspace lanes made it even better.

"In only three and a half weeks, you built this?" asked Lakau Meo, staring up at the base for the first time. He, Voyan, Sanya, and many others stood on a wood platform hanging from a tree, at the edge of the woods.

"That's the power of labor that never sleeps," said Voyan, pointing to the battle droids and repair drones from *Encounter* that had built this place. "Iron men have their uses, Lord Lakau."

"So it seems." The huge Felinian put his hand on his chin. "I hear you want to take my son with you, to the outside world."

"I do, my lord," said Voyan.

Shau Meo nodded rapidly, while his sister frowned. "Is Shau ready for that?" Miha Meo asked.

"I am!" Shau said. "I am, I am ready!"

"Many of our children have been taken by the Hutt slavers. And now you want me to part with my son?" asked Lakau. His ears tilted back.

Shau's ears went down too, but he set his shoulders firmly. "Father, I want to do this! I've spent my whole life relying on others to keep me safe, because- because- because I was born too early, I didn't grow tall enough, I'm not as strong as the others- you and Miha are out there fighting for our clan! Our whole village! If I go with these people, I can fight too, in a way only I can."

"Hyperspace navigation, my lord," said Voyan. "Very few are capable of this. Your son is one of them, I believe."

"What does a... hopperspace navigator do?" asked Lakau.

"He charts courses, and directs our ship. With Shau on our side, we could attack the enemy from directions they never anticipated, at speeds they couldn't expect," Voyan said.

"Yes, those are good things in a battle. Surprise and speed... what the slavers have always had on us. Shau, can you turn the tables on those monsters?"

"I can, father," Shau said. He took a deep breath. "I can do this. I've got a chance to stand for myself. Can you deny that to any man?"

Sanya tried very hard not to laugh at the worst possible moment. In his long tunic and blue ribbons, with his delicate features and charming looks, Shau didn't look classically manly. At all. But the Felinians didn't see things that way. *Don't be close-minded, Sanya,* she told herself, *masculinity and femininity don't have such important distinctions here. You've had three weeks to get used to that!*

"No, I cannot," Lakau said, breaking into a smile. He put a big, strong hand on Shau's head. "Go, my son. Take our war to the stars. Guide the alien starship against our foes. Bring glory to the clan of Meo!"

The next morning, the first ship from Siskeen arrived, with an unexpected guest. Down from the vessel came a relentlessly handsome Sephi man, dark robes swirling around him in the engine backwash, his long black hair and fiery eyes, such an aesthetically perfect combination it almost knocked Sanya off her feet. *Wow!* she thought.

"Announcing the arrival of Tar-Mairon, Overlord of Siskeen and all the Hunnovers Sector!" another Sephi proclaimed.

"Who?" Lakau asked.

Tar-Mairon came forward, graceful, lean, and tall. "Your new patron," he said, his voice smooth like flowing water. Lakau could have broken him in half, Sanya was sure, but something told her Tar-Mairon was not the kind of Sephi to ever let a situation get out of control. And that was a good thing, because Lakau didn't like what he heard.

"Patron?" he asked. "I have no patron. The Meo clan stands alone!"

The Sephi waved forward one of his lesser servants, who offered up a datapad. "My dear Lakau, I have an order for several hundred blasters in your name. These blasters all bear the mark of my factories. And I'm giving them to you, for free! What am I, if not your patron?"

"This was the deal I made with Komara," Lakau said. "You are not my patron."

"Ah, Lady Komara, that adorable little thing!" Tar-Mairon smiled brilliantly. "Where is she? I hope she's alright."

"Captain Komara is aboard her ship, and I don't think she'd like being called adorable," Voyan said. The Sephi's smile went out, replaced by a befuddled look.

"Oh dear," he said. "Poor creature. Such beauty and strength on this lovely planet... and then there's you. So painfully mediocre."

Uncalled for, thought Sanya, drastically revising her opinion of this divinely dashing Sephi. Voyan gave him a flat stare, like a man who'd heard a joke about himself for the hundredth time.

"And look at this!" Tar-Mairon went on, gliding over to Shau and Miha. "What pretty kitties! My heart is soothed just looking upon you. No wonder you are fetching such a high price on the slave markets of Nar Shaddaa." Lakau, his children, and all the other Felinians on the platform were not amused. But the Sephi went on: "It truly is tragic. But, as your loving patron, I offer you a token of my good will."

He raised a hand and snapped his fingers, and out of his ship's hold came a dozen more Felinians, not one above the age of twenty, Sanya thought. Most were female. *Doesn't take a genius to figure out why,* Sanya thought. There were cries of joy and disbelief from the crowd, as families were suddenly reunited.

"These young ones claimed allegiance to the Meo clan," said Tar-Mairon, sweeping his hand about. "We intercepted a slaving ship last week and found them aboard. They've been well-cared for by my finest physicians, no off-world diseases, I assure you."

Lakau stepped forward, a frenzied look in his eyes. "Were there others?" he asked.

"They weren't of your kind. But any I find, I will return to their rightful place. Remember that, Lakau. Remember that this is what it means to have Tar-Mairon as your patron."

The big Felinian became lost in thought, as returned youths were whisked off back to the village. Sanya's only regret is that as soon as the Siskeen ship had taken off, *Encounter*'s shuttle landed, and it was time to go back to space. She'd had a good time down here on Zoma V. Even if the Felinians had been too conservative to share their amity with her. *Oh well,* thought Sanya. *At least Shau's coming with us...*

"Voyan, Durm, Xiss, Sanya, Alize," Esera muttered, counting off heads. "Plus me, Murshida, Purity, Buna, Oto, and Klaud. Eleven heads. So why are there twelve in my hangar?"

"Um, hello," said Shau Meo, cheeks flushed and ears tilted.

"What the hell are you doing here?" asked Esera. *Do you think you can get away with this, Voyan? Do you think you can bring your cat-eared girlfriend aboard my ship!?*

"I'm bringing Shau Meo aboard as our hyperspace navigator in training, Captain," said Voyan, straight-faced, no deception in the Force. Esera scowled.

"You didn't tell me this!" she said. "What are her qualifications? What's her education? Why do you think I'll allow you to have this girl hanging around here? This is a warship, not a pleasure barge!"

Someone snorted. Alize sighed, Sanya started to laugh, and Zule covered her mouth and looked away. Shau's face was red now, ears all the way back, while Voyan stood impassive as always. "Uh, Lady Komara?" Shau asked. "You know I'm not a girl, right?"

Esera blinked. "What?"

It was true. Shau Meo was not a girl. Once clothed in the midnight blue trousers and jacket of Esera's private branch of the Confederate Navy, ribbons significantly reduced, it turned out that Shau Meo was indeed a boy. A very cute boy. A very cute cat-eared boy who plotted the hyperspace jump out of the Zoma system only a few degrees off of the computer result. An unacceptable margin of error that would land them inside a star if used, but for a first attempt, it was exceptionally good.

"I told you, he's got talent," Voyan whispered to her. "Give him a year and he could be rivaling those Givin navigators. Imagine if he'd spent his whole life counting fish..."

"Fine, you were right, we can train this guy," Esera whispered back. "But I want to know before you bring anyone else aboard my ship."

"Captain, I did tell you."

"When?"

"I sent you three messages about it, you never even opened them. I thought you were still sick up here."

Esera suddenly remembered the messages from Voyan she'd ignored, and hid her face in her hands. "Set course for Agamar, by way of Raxus?"

"Agamar? Raxus?" Voyan gave her a questioning look. So did Shau, from his post at navigation. "Captain, I thought we were staying in Hutt Space."

"Yeah, well, Grievous has other ideas," said Esera. "Welcome to *Encounter*, Mister Meo. Nothing ever goes as planned for long."

"We're *not* fighting the Hutts, Captain Komara?" The Felinian's ears fell.

"Not today. Galactic war has galactic scale. Didn't Commander Voyan tell you that?"

"I guess he implied it..." Shau stared at his console, his spirits flagging for a moment. But then he sat up straighter, eyes hardening, resolve flowing in the Force. "But I'm sure our business with the slavers isn't done. We'll be back here sooner or later. Where is Raxus, Captain? How do we get there? And, um, why are we going there first?"

"So we can get you some acceptable clothes and a uniform that fits better than Zule's spares. I know some ladies who will help you." Esera sat back in the captain's chair. "Mister Meo, the bridge is yours. Take us to Raxus."

"Uh..." Shau looked around, seeing no one but the droids, Esera, and Voyan. "Can I ask for help, Captain?"

"Of course."

"Alright! Um, you," Shau pointed at the pilot droid at the station next to him, "I need to get to Raxus. How do I do that?"

The droid stood up and came to the navigator's post. "First, sir, you must align the ship with the initial hyperspace lane..."

Author's notes: I told you guys it was a long one. It's the price I pay for trying to do an arc transition chapter in a single go. Twice the update time, double the length. I apologize for nothing. It was kinda necessary because Shau Meo's been slated to join the team for a long time, but since he's a literal who living on an irrelevant backwater planet, he couldn't be foreshadowed like Sanya or Purity. And since he's a stranger to Galactic norms, I needed time to explore his culture a little, unlike Murshida or Zule. And then I also had spend some time on Zule and Sanya, and then I had the Jedi Council's endless deliberations on time-sensitive events (many such cases) to include, and Grievous setting up the next plot arc... the result is a 22,341 word chapter. Ooftah. And I thought this would be a 6,000 word chapter.

Zoma V is based on Carboniferous-era Earth, right down to the average global temperature. It's no wonder Esera, from a planet even colder than ice age Earth, eventually succumbed to heat stroke. This was the fate of many unfortunate Kyrgyz who fled the high altitude Wakhan region to the refugee camps in Peshawar in the 80s. Timewatch, why does Afghanistan keep coming up in your author's notes? Just you guys wait, it hasn't even begun.

Chapter 48 will be coming some time in November. If you were paying attention, you've already identified the guest stars for this arc...

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